



York Civic Trust

Towards a transport strategy for York **A report from York Citizens' Transport Forum and York Civic Trust** **14th December 2020**

York's current Local Transport Plan was drafted in 2011 and sets out a long-term strategy for the city's transport system for the period from 2011 to 2031, and a more detailed programme over the period to 2016. There is broad agreement that a new Local Transport Plan is needed, and that work should start soon in the context of the draft Local Plan, which is currently being examined. In this short report we suggest what the key principles for a future transport strategy might be.

We do not explore in detail the specific policy measures which might be adopted; these will be addressed in a set of strategy proposals for individual elements of the transport strategy, which we plan to complete over the period to March 2021. However, we do emphasise the importance of coordinating those individual elements of strategy and the contributions of different modes, to achieve a holistic approach in which each reinforces the others.

We anticipate that it will be necessary to analyse a series of combinations of policy options in order to identify those which are likely to be most cost-effective, affordable and acceptable, and we hope that work on this analysis process will start in the spring of 2021. This strategy statement, and the companion proposals on individual elements of transport strategy, have been formulated as inputs to that process.

This report draws on three sources: a report by York Citizens' Transport Forum in March 2020, subsequent discussions within York Civic Trust's Transport Advisory Group, and a further meeting of the Forum in December 2020, which reassessed the situation in the light of the changes experienced since March.

The context

We have assumed that the new Local Transport Plan (LTP4) will, as previously, specify detailed plans for a five-year period (provisionally 2022-27) within the context of a 15-year strategy (provisionally 2022-2037). It will cover the whole of the administrative area of the City of York, but will need to consider the wider regional context, including patterns of commuting across the boundary. Subject to the current devolution proposals, it may in due course need to form part of a wider Local Transport Plan for York and North Yorkshire. As

the Forum notes, there is also an immediate need for a short-term action plan while the new Local Transport Plan is being formulated.

York has a history of successful innovation in transport policy but is in danger of losing its reputation unless policies are constantly updated to take account of evolving best practice. It has one of the most extensive footstreet networks in the country; its park and ride service is the UK's largest; and it has managed to maintain bus patronage more effectively than many other provincial cities, despite implementing only limited bus priorities. It is a relatively dense city with a flat terrain conducive to walking and cycling and has the advantage of being a unitary authority with direct control over both planning and transport. In many ways it is a microcosm of the challenges of urban transport and is thus often successful in attracting government funding to support innovations, such as the use of real time data and bus fleet electrification.

However, it faces several challenges. Congestion has worsened (though the experience of lockdown indicates that it can be reduced). Air pollution continues to exceed legal limits, yet the current Air Quality Action Plan only runs to December 2020. The Council's declaration of a climate emergency, and its target (which may already be slipping) to be carbon-neutral by 2030, mean that action is needed now. Against this background, the constraints imposed by York's historic road network, the city's status as a focus for international tourism and the sensitivity of its environment all impose some limitations on the solutions available. The need to support and strengthen its economic base and the wide disparities between its affluent and poor communities require a carefully targeted approach. Population growth of up to 20% by 2030 could, the draft Local Plan suggests, increase congestion by over 50%. Over that period developments in the shared economy, decarbonisation and automation mean that our transport system will look quite different from today's.

Our vision for York

York therefore needs to adopt a new approach. Our vision is of a city which respects its environment while enhancing quality of life, social justice and economic vitality. York's new Local Transport Plan should be designed to contribute to that vision. It needs to address the city's needs over the next two decades, while identifying steps which can be taken now. For this to happen, political consensus will be essential to ensure that policies are not reversed each time the Council's political control changes.

Problems to be tackled

As the Forum's report of March 2020 notes, congestion, air pollution and the impact of transport on climate change are all serious problems for York. The new Local Transport Plan needs to be designed to achieve significant reductions in all three problems, whilst ensuring socially equitable access and economic vitality.

The Plan also needs to address several other problems, of which the most serious are transport's impact on mental and physical health; danger from traffic; intrusion of vehicles into public space and poor levels of access for some sectors of the population and business.

These problems are in many cases interrelated. Air pollution, danger and lack of active travel all contribute to problems of poor public health. All of these and poor access affect

some sectors of society much more seriously than others, raising concerns over social justice. It is thus essential that any new Plan tackles them together.

In its December meeting, the Forum reconsidered its assessment of problems in the light of experience during 2020. It anticipates that working from home and increased online shopping will be sustained. It hopes that there will be a return to public transport but notes what appears to be an increase in car traffic on the school run. Overall, it anticipates that the effects of the pandemic will lead to some reductions in peak travel, but to increases at other times and in other places. While it accepts that future trends are uncertain, it maintains its view that most of the problems listed above are likely to become significantly worse over the next five to ten years unless significant action is taken.

Forum members welcomed the improved conditions which York experienced during the first lockdown, and suggest that the Council should ensure that the public remains aware of what was achieved and should aim to return to similar levels of reduced congestion and pollution and increased safety while providing for increased access.

Members were conscious that they did not fully understand how recent trends in traffic, cycling and pollution had arisen. The Forum reinforced its earlier view that the Council and the public need to understand the scale of the problems listed above and of the underlying trends. Such data will be an essential starting point for developing the new Plan. As analysis of Plan options progresses, it will also be necessary to predict levels in the two horizon years of 2027 and 2037 if nothing further is done. We recommend that a new approach be adopted to monitoring the transport system, and hope, jointly with the Council, to be able to prepare a summary of current trends early in 2021.

Objectives

In achieving our vision as outlined above, the new Local Transport Plan should be designed to meet several interconnected objectives for the city. Of these, as the Forum stressed in its March 2020 report, the most important are ensuring that the transport system is efficient, generates substantially less pollution and results in far lower levels of carbon emissions.

At the same time, the Plan must be designed to achieve the objectives of ensuring safety, supporting public health, increasing equality of access, enhancing liveability, and protecting public space and heritage. A Plan which successfully addresses all of these will also help to strengthen the sustainability and economy of the city.

In its December meeting, the Forum confirmed that these goals are central to any new Local Transport Plan. It concluded that the priorities should remain as listed, while giving greater emphasis to public health, safety and regeneration of the city's economy, given the impacts of the pandemic on the retail and hospitality sectors. In support of these, York needs to assess what mix of economic activities will best sustain the vibrancy of its city centre.

Judged against these objectives, the aims of the 2011 Local Transport Plan provide an appropriate model for a new Local Transport Plan, but the new Plan needs to give greater emphasis to public health, equality of access and the urban economy. However, the Forum was unclear as to the achievements resulting from the 2011 Plan. It would be helpful if the

Council could set out its achievements over the last decade, and what remains to be done from the 2011 Plan, to provide a context for the new Plan. Our monitoring proposals above should contribute to this.

While these objectives may on occasion be in conflict, they can and must be addressed together. Our new approach to monitoring proposes a set of SMART objectives, with outcome indicators for each. We suggest that the Council should set realistic targets for achievement for each indicator overall and for different categories of user and areas of the city. It should then use them to monitor progress in ways which ensures accountability.

Strategy

In meeting the objectives outlined above, the Plan needs to adopt a holistic, bold and visionary strategy which achieves significant changes in travel behaviour in the immediate future. As we suggest above, it will be helpful to set targets for each of the key objectives and elements of the strategy. This will enable the Council regularly to monitor and report on progress, make the resulting information and data publicly available on a dedicated website and modify the strategy if sufficient progress is not being made.

The transport strategy should be designed to make effective use of the full range of potential policy measures and to combine them to ensure that the strategy is acceptable, affordable and effective. In doing so it should seek to emulate the best examples in the UK and continental Europe of integrated, sustainable transport planning.

The strategy needs to be developed in compatible ways in five broad geographical areas: the historic centre; the inner suburbs; the outer suburbs within the Outer Ring Road; the city's villages; and (with adjacent authorities) the communities within York's catchment area. It also needs to consider separately the needs of residents, commuters, visitors and businesses.

Since population growth is likely to exacerbate York's transport problems, the key elements of the strategy will be measures to enhance public transport, walking and cycling and, at the same time, to reduce car travel, especially in congested and sensitive areas of the City, and to reduce the need to travel longer distances, particularly through the design of sustainable communities. This combination of "carrots" and "sticks" will help make the strategy both more effective and more acceptable to the public and the business community. It should be reinforced by adopting a "hearts and minds" approach, in which incentives are designed to encourage users to change their travel habits, and to respect the needs of others.

To reinforce this core strategy, action is needed to improve the operation of the road network, by reallocating road space and using it more efficiently, and to improve freight and delivery operations.

As input to the strategy, a fuller understanding is required of the need to travel, and the way in which it varies by area of the city, time of day and type of user. This should help ensure that actions to encourage users to change their travel habits are focused on those who are realistically able to do so.

In its December meeting, the Forum reviewed this list of strategy elements and priorities and concluded that they remained valid. It would like to see greater emphasis on rebuilding trust in public transport and in enhancing the services offered. It fully supports the government's emphasis on active travel, but would like to see increased support for walking, not least as a contributor to enhanced public health. It reiterates the importance of managing levels of car use and advocates a greater focus on reducing the school run and on encouraging smarter car use through car clubs and electric vehicles. It proposes that additional support be given to sustaining local centres and facilities, which will be of importance in providing for those working from home. It would like to see greater emphasis on the allocation of road space to public transport, walking and cycling. It also proposes the encouragement of more efficient and low energy freight distribution.

York Civic Trust is developing proposals for each of these elements of transport strategy, with more detailed recommendations on:

- Improving public transport
- Improving walking
- Improving cycling
- Managing car use
- Changing travel patterns through communications technology and sustainable communities
- Improving operation of the road network
- Improving freight and deliveries,

and hopes to be able to seek the Forum's views on each of these in the spring of 2021. The Forum's proposals for individual measures and their implementation are set out in a companion report on its December meeting.

The hierarchy of users as adopted in the 2011 Plan, which places pedestrians, those with disabilities and cyclists first and car commuters last, remains an appropriate basis for determining priorities. However, it needs to be tailored to the needs of users in different parts of the transport network. The Forum's principal concern with the hierarchy is that it sees little evidence of it being applied in practice in the decisions which the Council takes.

Enabling the Plan to be delivered

In formulating the strategy, it will be important to address the three most common barriers to progress in urban transport planning: governance, finance and public and political acceptability.

Governance problems typically arise from split responsibilities, either within or outside the lead authority. As a unitary authority, York is fortunate in currently having direct responsibility for most aspects of transport, planning and the environment; the most obvious exceptions are deregulated bus services, train services and private sector development decisions. However, this is likely to change with devolution, with some aspects of transport policy potentially becoming a mayoral responsibility. The government's proposals for the planning system may also further strengthen the role of developers.

The Council should ensure that its Local Plan, Local Transport Plan, Air Quality Action Plan and Carbon Reduction Plan reinforce one another and support wider plans for the economy and the environment. It should encourage the closest possible collaboration with developers, economic partnerships and transport operators as key delivery agents. While York is a free-standing city, the future of public transport services and fares will need to be planned and financed in conjunction with neighbouring local authorities, Transport for the North and bus and rail operators.

Finance will always be a barrier. Shortage of finance is aggravated by the mismatch between capital and revenue funding, and the increasing tendency for government to offer funding for specific modes and solutions. The Forum would like to see increased funding for those modes higher in the Council's hierarchy, but is concerned that funding for public transport and active travel might be further constrained as a result of the current economic downturn. It argues that the strategy should focus on the most cost-effective policy packages, and use revenue generating measures, such as targeted workplace parking levies and congestion charging, to support them. One benefit of a well-developed strategy is that priority investments can be identified under each strategy heading and used in response to invitations to bid for mode-specific government funding. This should help ensure that any such funding is used in ways which are consistent with the overall strategy.

To this end it will help to have a clear assessment of the funds likely to be available to finance the strategy and any constraints on their use, and to seek financial support from other policy sectors such as air quality and climate change, and from a wider range of bodies, including developers and the beneficiaries of new investment. All potential funders need to work together to expand the funding base, encourage continuity of funding and ensure that the measures in the strategy provide best value for money.

Members of the public and the business community will reach their views on specific policies in terms of their own needs and experiences and of attitudes expressed in the media. There is always a risk that individuals misinterpret the needs of others and the likely impacts of a particular policy. Moreover, the views expressed to politicians and in conventional consultations are often those of the active vocal minority. The Forum notes that this has been particularly prevalent in response to the measures recently implemented by the Council. Politicians may well, as a result, gain a biased impression of the public's opinions. Best practice guidance stresses the importance of collaborative involvement of the public, as a way of overcoming these problems; evidence suggests that, done well, such approaches also offer a rich source of policy ideas. The Forum's latest report proposes ways in which the Forum can help achieve a greater consensus.

Within the resources available to them, York Civic Trust, York Citizens' Transport Forum and the Forum's co-sponsors stand ready to support the City of York Council in the development of its new Local Transport Plan. We look forward to working together to achieve our vision of a city, and transport system, which respects its environment while enhancing quality of life, social justice and economic vitality.