

## **Wakefield Future High Streets Fund Consultation**

Thank you for spending so much time listening and talking when we met in The Hepworth Gallery consultation event.

I am writing as a long-time resident of Wakefield city, and as an environmentalist representing Wakefield Friends of the Earth and Just Transition Wakefield.

As an environmentalist, I am of course going to stress the need for any investment to be zero carbon. Low carbon or reduced carbon will not be sufficient for Wakefield Council's zero carbon ambitions. This requires considerable thought and planning and proper integration with other local authority workstreams.

I am also going to stress the need to plan in a wider concept of sustainability. If the plans are sufficiently integrated into all aspects of the local authority's work and the needs of communities, the city centre redevelopment can adopt a multi-solving approach that brings multiple improvements to many aspects of life. This integrated thinking needs to be born in mind throughout the comments below.

Further, by multi-solving problems, other funding streams beyond city centre development can become available, and because multiple benefits are derived from the plans, cost-effectiveness improves significantly.

### **BHS site.**

The proposal to redevelop or rebuild this highly visible, central site as a community hub is to be applauded and encouraged.

There needs to be a thorough cost-benefit analysis in terms of embodied carbon of the existing building structure compared to the additional embodied carbon of any replacement structure, so that the carbon cost of rebuild can be compared with the carbon cost of renovation.

There needs to be a similarly thorough cost-benefit analysis of the building's post-development energy usage and running costs, to give confidence that the carbon and financial savings of the new/renovated building are sufficient to off-set the financial cost and genuinely zero carbon.

The end use of this community hub is also critical. Firstly, as a high profile public building, it needs to educate its users and its visitors to raise the profile of the many benefits of zero carbon buildings – including retrofit if appropriate.

Secondly, it needs to engage the whole community, including those who already use the city centre on a daily basis. Therefore, as well as the Library and Museum, the building must surely have meeting rooms, café, and advice services. For example, could CAB move from King Street to this building when complete? What about other 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations, particularly those working with communities and individuals?

Because The Ridings integrates with the BHS site interior, and because The Ridings Centre Management already have a community focus, it is important to consider these questions with them so that the final use and community offer is complementary not competitive.

### **Performance space.**

Whilst this may not be top of my priority list, it is not without merit. Careful thought needs to be given to ways to use this space – not only regular performances, but local producer markets, proper farmers markets, why not craft and crafter markets – for example, the West Riding is known for fabric and clothing – are there bespoke producers and upcyclers who could share market space with fabric stalls? Could existing Wakefield businesses, like Habiknit, be tempted into such a space once a month – rent free – to support their on-going economic sustainability?

I believe that your intent is to tempt businesses and customers with specialist offers. This is one example where a reputation for diversity and quality can be quickly built, bringing new and regular additional visitors to the city.

To retain the confidence of local people, this space needs to be busy enough, often enough, for it not to be seen as a white elephant.

### **Land use changes.**

The existing retail offer is too spread out – from Wilkinsons across to the end of Trinity, and to Wood Street and Northgate via the bus is too large an area for the number of shops.

Additionally, many of the retail units are physically very tired, and many are interspersed with empty units.

I would like to see the units on Kirkgate – at least the downhill (Wetherspoons /cinema side) turned into city centre housing – essential as part of the regeneration of the city centre's economic life – and the shops being relocated with, assistance so that they are not losing out, because many are vulnerable businesses.

The advantage of this is that the shopping centre footprint will start at The Ridings, going as far as Cross Street. This would be a small enough change to not give the impression that “half of Wakefield has been shut” but would make life easier for many.

Integrated with this sort of change should be a Business Rates Zone approach so that there are units with lower rates and service charges to encourage start-ups and enable struggling businesses to continue and re-vitalise. These do not have to be “packed off in the scruffy end of town” but could be integrated between other units to maintain the mix.

I recognise that there is a desire to separate retail and leisure to some extent, with retail being focused below Westgate and leisure being focused above Westgate (and on Westgate) including Wood Street (Civic Quarter) and Northgate. This must not be overdone – for the shopping centres to thrive, there needs to be leisure – especially cafes, meeting spaces, etc – integrated within the shopping area to support extended stays.

### **Policy implications.**

There is a need for national retailers to retain a foothold in Wakefield, but they need to be balanced with local businesses (not just food businesses) to give the City a unique feel.

Because Wakefield has obvious art attractions, the city centre aesthetic is a critical part of engaging visitors to The Hepworth, for example, so that these visitors

contribute economically to the whole city, not just The Hepworth and the waterfront.

Wakefield has managed to hold onto some historic and traditional buildings. These need to be shown off to their best. Unity Works has shown us the way here, but there is a lot more to do with street level frontage.

By increasing the residential accommodation in and on the edge of the city centre, it is essential that food shopping remains a firm part of the retail offer to avoid the need for these new residents to visit out of town outlets for their weekly essentials. Whether Morrisons, M&S and a revitalised market is enough will require a specialist to answer.

### **Transport.**

Shrinking the centre will improve retention of visitors and enable them to visit the whole centre not just half of it, which is what many people currently do – eg either Trinity or The Ridings. However, there remains a question of how we get visitors to a zero carbon city centre. Two railway stations and a bus station are an important start. Further thought needs to be directed at the walking route from Kirkgate to the city, especially if new housing is to be infilled onto the 123 Kirkgate site and the Snooty Fox site.

Car parking will be contentious, particularly in the early years of the transformation: businesses will worry if cars are to be discouraged, but we cannot skew the development plans to accommodate a mode of transport that is likely to be significantly reduced by 2035 and irrelevant by 2050. Therefore, in the short term, there will be a need for car parking, but Wakefield will need “visit by bus” and “visit by train” campaigns, as in the 1920s and 1930s, for example – using similarly modern artistic memes to express what Wakefield is all about – i.e. an arts hub amongst other things...

In addition, local people need secure, dry bicycle storage, whether they commute to work in the centre or visit to shop. This could be integrated into existing car parks, or in zones reflecting the best traffic free/low traffic cycle routes into town – which also need planning, defining and marketing.

### **Environmental management.**

In the next two decades, city centres will be challenged to adapt to the climate change that is already locked in by existing emissions.

Increased rainfall will lead to increased run-off. How will this be managed and captured? It would be possible to capture roof and precinct run-off in large underground tanks that provide two essential environmental services. Firstly, free unmetered water to supply automated watering for all town centre planting. Secondly, they can be pre-emptively emptied into the river system prior to forecast extreme rainfall events, to capture run-off during these events as part of the active catchment management plan. This may have increased capital cost, but has potential to attract support from flood management or climate adaptation funding streams.

Increasing summer temperatures will combine with the “heat island effect” which is known to become dangerous for older people and uncomfortable for all, driving visitors away. Therefore, there needs to be serious consideration for adaptation and

mitigation measures to avoid or reduce this well-known effect. Tree planting, replacing sections of hard surfaces with grass, inclusion of garden beds throughout the precinct areas, all contribute to this. However, with proper imagination, the use of green walls on identified buildings will have significant impacts to cool the buildings and the precinct in summer, whilst insulating the buildings in winter. Such green walls also add positively to the city centre aesthetic and provide positive talking points to engage the community during the development phase. And of course all of this planting can be watered automatically from the underground tanks using solar pumping systems.

### **Building management.**

As buildings are redeveloped and renovated, the council will need to work closely with building owners and leaseholders to improve the energy efficiency of the commercial building stock and to support them to move to a zero carbon model – through choice of energy supplier, through the phased removal of gas-fired heating, through the use of modern controls to further improve efficiency, and potentially through a zero- carbon district heating scheme for the city centre.

This cannot be left out of the plan, because businesses will need to reduce all aspects of their running costs to survive and thrive in an uncertain and fluid period of economic transformation influenced by Brexit, automation, climate change and the continued growth of online retail.

As part of the building management plan, the council needs to work with building owners to consider installation of solar PV capability on all suitable roofs. This will, in itself, improve the income stream from each building, contributing towards the economic sustainability of these buildings – this is an easy way to diversify the income derived from the city centre.

### **Conclusions**

This is a fantastic opportunity to integrate Wakefield's zero carbon ambitions with its community development ambitions and its city centre economy ambitions. A properly thought out city centre plan that integrates all three of these strands will have so many benefits:

- leading edge integrated design and planning to deliver benefits for every community including the business community;
- pace-setting zero carbon city centre plans;
- improved health and social integration;
- national and regional recognition and opportunities to share technological development costs with other towns and cities on the same journey;.

It is also essential that our small towns in the district can see benefits for them from this, through elements like

- economic spin-offs,
- through their own town centre development plans,
- through integrated public transport across the district,
- through the development or redevelopment of local supply chains, emphasising the Preston Model.

By starting with the Preston model of economic development, which aims to keep as much investment and cash-flow within the economic district, plans can include

- the use of local tradespeople and an insistence on the use of local labour;
- a procurement policy that seeks local suppliers as the starting point and that encourages local business into new-to-them supply chains to benefit from the opportunities;
- a procurement policy that seeks zero carbon suppliers, or in their absence, suppliers with meaningful policy approaches that will enable them to become zero carbon businesses in the near future;
- an encouragement of local agricultural and horticultural supply for local markets and food businesses;
- all of the above can be the central marketing to encourage local people to rediscover shopping locally.

**Multiple benefits through multi-solving problems.**

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