

MATTER 2
THE HOUSING STRATEGY

The housing strategy: spatial distribution

1 Introduction

- 1.1 York is a very special place. King George VI once remarked, "*The history of York is the history of England*". This was no exaggeration. As Paragraphs 1.51 to 1.54 of the Plan and the '*Heritage Topic Paper*' [Doc. SD103] make clear, in its townscape, street layouts, historic buildings and its extensive archaeological deposits, the 2,000-year history of the City is still clearly legible across the settlement of today. York's historic environment is recognised as being of not just national, but international, importance.
- 1.2 The character of the City, however, is not limited solely to its historic buildings, urban morphology and archaeology. A key element of what makes York special is its landscape setting. This fact has been recognised by successive Governments over the past fifty years through the requirement for the York Local Plan to define a Green Belt which will "*safeguard the special character of the City which might be endangered by unrestricted expansion*"¹.
- 1.3 There are six historic towns in England which have a Green Belt whose primary purpose is to safeguard their special character and setting. Of those, however, York is unique not only in terms of the fact that it is the only one whose inner Green belt boundaries have never been defined, but it is the only one of the six which sits wholly within an encircling ring-road. From many stretches of this route, one can see the Minster tower and the edge of the main built-up area over the surrounding farmland and, as result, gain an appreciation the scale and landscape setting of the historic city. Moreover, York is the only one of those Cities where it is possible to obtain views of its Minster from so many different locations on the arterial approaches to and around the circumference of the City (in some cases up to 15 to 20 miles away). Appendix A and B which reproduces two figures from the *York Central Historic Core Conservation Area Appraisal* [Doc. SD104] illustrates this point.
- 1.4 The combination of below-ground archaeological deposits, its rich and diverse architecture and its landscape setting - all appreciable within a place which is walkable – make York unique.

¹ The Green Belts, MHLG, 1962

- 1.5 York's historic environment is the primary reason why so many people choose to visit it each year, it is what helps attract businesses to invest in this part of Yorkshire, and why people are increasingly choosing to live and work in the City. York's historic assets play such a key role in the economic well-being of the City, in the quality of life enjoyed by its communities, and in making York such an attractive distinct place, that the starting point for any strategy for the City should be to ensure that whatever happens in York, it does so in a manner which not only safeguards, but also strengthens, the city's unique character.

2 Question 2.8

The Plan's development strategy is set out in Policy SS1. This provides five spatial principles to guide the location of development through the plan. In broad terms, is this the most appropriate spatial strategy?

- 2.1 Yes. The importance York's outstanding built, natural and historic character and the contribution that these elements individually and in combination make to the City is clearly articulated both within the Local Plan (especially Section 1 (*Background and Vision*) and Section 8 (*Placemaking, Heritage, Design and Culture*)) and within its supporting documents (particularly, in terms of the historic environment, the '*Heritage Topic Paper*'). Given the fundamental role which York's historic and natural environment play in underpinning key aspects of the economy, the contribution which they make to the quality of life enjoyed by both residents and visitors, and to the unique identity of the City, it is wholly appropriate that conserving and enhancing York's historic and natural environment has been identified as one of the five spatial principles that guide the location of future development.
- 2.2 Moreover, in terms of the heritage of the City, there is a requirement under Criterion C.2 of the retained RSS Policy Y1 that plans and strategies for the York sub-area should "*Protect and enhance the nationally significant historical and environmental character of York, including its historic setting, views of the Minster and important open areas*". A strategy which did not include a spatial principle which included the conservation of the historic environment would certainly be questionable in terms of conformity with the retained RSS policy.

3 Question 2.9

Policy SS1 says that the location of development will be guided by the five spatial principles. However, the Plan strategy does not quantify the spatial distribution of new housing across the Plan area.

c) How has this distribution been arrived at and what is the justification for it?

- 3.1 The distribution of housing across the Plan area has been influenced, to a large extent, by the need to safeguard those elements which have been identified by the Council as contributing to the special character and setting of the historic City (and, therefore, comply with the requirements of the RSS Policies). As part of the background work on the emerging Local Plan, the Council has undertaken a great deal of work to identify the various elements which contribute to the special character and setting of the York. This work (which formed the basis of the '*Heritage Topic Paper*') has helped to provide a framework against which to consider not only the appropriateness of the development strategy for the future growth of the City, but also, through the '*Heritage Impact Appraisal*' [Doc. SD101] the initial appraisal of the individual sites where that growth might be accommodated.
- 3.2 Whilst Historic England has some disagreements with the authority about the size and extent of some of the sites and considers that a number of the are inappropriate and should be deleted, nonetheless, the overall broad distribution proposed in the Plan is supported.
- 3.3 Based upon this framework, Historic England considers that there is considerable merit in the general distribution which the Plan puts forward including the proposal for a proportion of the housing growth to be accommodated in the two new free-standing settlements. Whilst such an approach clearly affects the openness of the Green Belt in those locations (and, as a consequence, will result in considerable harm to certain elements which contribute to the special character and setting of the historic City), nevertheless, the degree of harm is likely to be far less than would be caused should that housing, instead, be accommodated on the edge of the existing built-up area of the City or in its surrounding settlements.
- 3.4 As such, a strategy in which part of York's development needs are met in new free-standing settlements beyond the ring road would help to safeguard the size and compact nature of the historic city, the perception of York being a free-standing historic city set within a rural hinterland, key views towards York from the ring road, and the relationship of the main built-up area of York to its surrounding settlements.
- 3.5 The size of these settlements and their location, as currently indicated, appears to have taken into account of the relationship which York has with its existing surrounding villages – an element which has been identified in the Heritage Topic Paper as being part of the character of the City. It is also apparent that they have been designed to ensure that they do not threaten the individual identity or rural setting of their neighbouring villages, the

green wedges that penetrate into the urban area, and important views from the ring road. We would have significant concerns were the size of either of these settlements to increase (either in this or subsequent Plan periods) beyond the boundaries currently shown.

- 3.6 However, nowhere in the Local Plan does it clearly articulate the precise reasons why such a development strategy has been selected, why the settlements are located where they are, or why they are the size proposed nor does it set out the benefits that such a strategy is likely to deliver in terms of safeguarding those elements which contribute to the special historic character and setting of York.
- d) Is the distribution consistent with the overall approach set out in Policy SS1?
- 3.7 For the reasons set out above, in terms of the first bullet-point of Policy SS1 (conserving and enhancing York's historic character) the distribution is considered to be broadly consistent with that principle.
- e) Is the distribution of housing supported by the SA and will it lead to the most sustainable pattern of housing growth?
- 3.8 In terms of the historic environment, short of decanting the housing that would have been in the two new settlements to the neighbouring local planning authorities, for York the distribution is likely to be the most sustainable option.
- 3.9 The work undertaken in the '*Heritage Topic Paper*' and the appraisal of the individual sites in the '*Heritage Impact Appraisal*' has helped underpin the analysis within the Sustainability Appraisal of the likely effects which the Plan's development strategy might have upon the historic environment. In terms of reconciling the need for sites to meet the OAN of the City with that of preserving its historic character and setting, the SA has shown that, in the absence of a realistic alternative, the proposed distribution is likely to be the most sustainable strategy.
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- f) Has the Green Belt and/or any other constraints influenced the distribution of housing and, if so, how?
- 3.10 The distribution of housing has been influenced by a clear understanding of the elements which contribute to the special character and setting of the

City and the role which the Green Belt plays in safeguarding those elements.

- 3.11 The strategy has also been influenced by another key constraint and that is recognition that increasing the density and, particular, the heights of buildings not just within the historic core but elsewhere across the city has the potential to cause considerable harm to its historic character.

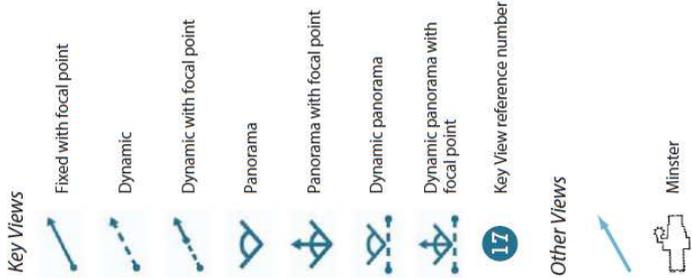
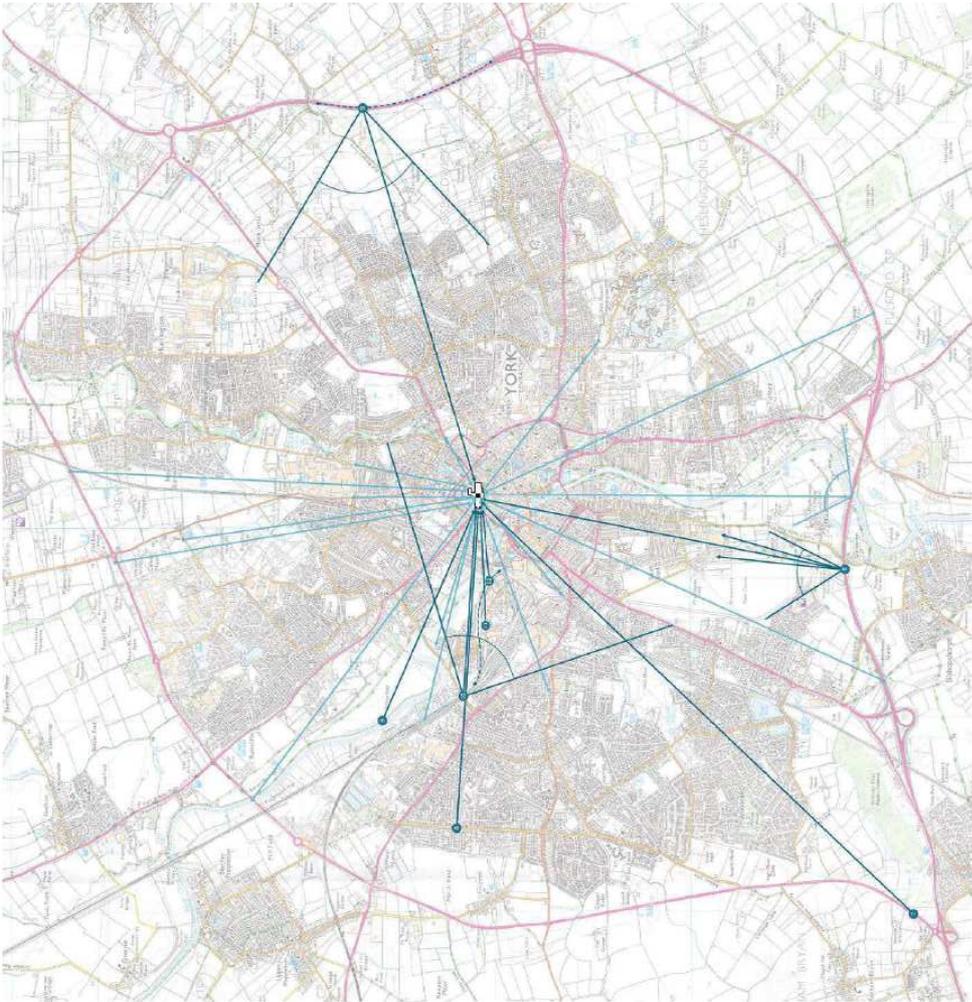
4 Question 2.10

Overall, is the spatial distribution of housing justified and is the Plan sound in this regard?

- 4.1 For the reasons set out above, the spatial distribution of housing is justified. Whilst there is no specific figures given within the Plan of the distribution of housing across the Plan area, the approach of limiting the amount of peripheral growth around the edge of the existing main built-up area of the City and of accommodating a proportion of the assessed development needs in two free-standing settlements is a perfectly justifiable and, in the absence of being able to accommodate that development in sites beyond the Green Belt, is the only one likely to deliver the housing needs of the City in a manner which safeguards the key elements which contribute to the special character and setting of the historic City.
- 4.2 The development strategy being put forward in the York Local Plan is radical. However, it is a strategy which has been driven by the hugely-complex challenge of reconciling the OAN against the need to preserve the setting and special character of one of the most important historic towns in England. Short of decanting housing to settlements beyond the outer boundary of the Green Belt, a strategy whereby a proportion of the housing needs are met in new free-standing settlements is the only way in which the dilemma faced by York's plan-makers can be reconciled. As a result it is considered that the spatial distribution is sound

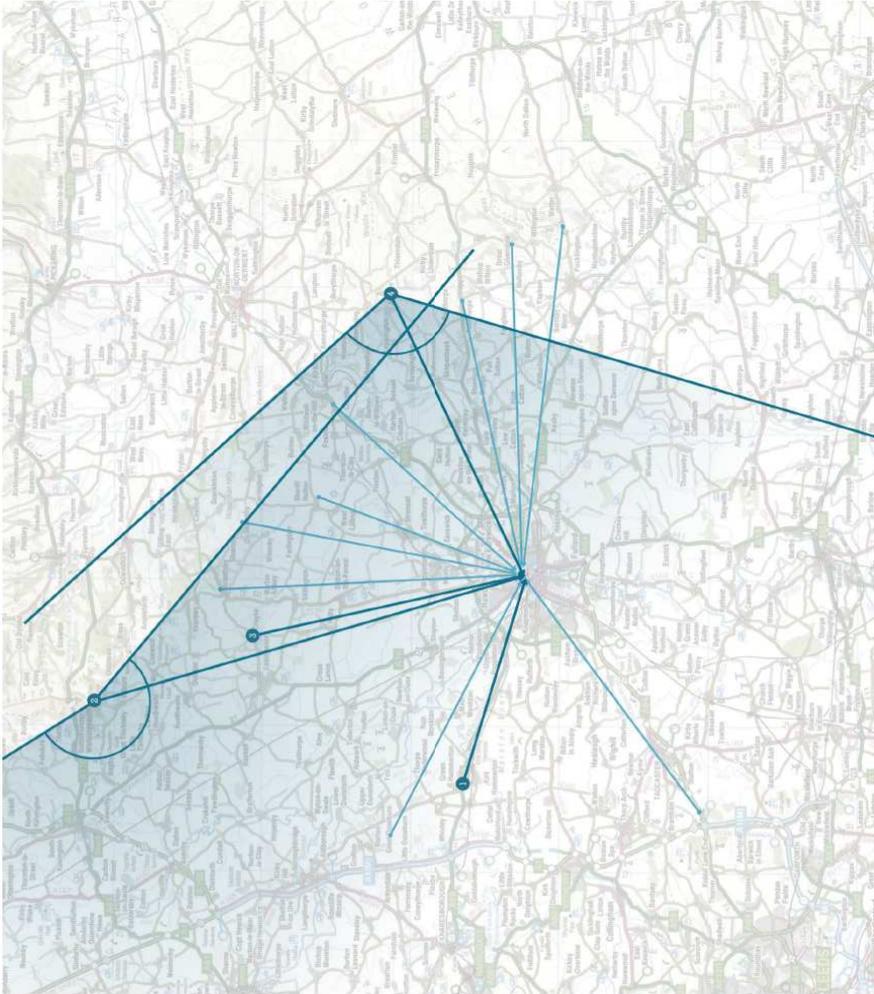
Appendix A:
Extract from the York Central Historic Core Conservation Area Appraisal

City-wide views



Appendix B:
Extract from the York Central Historic Core Conservation Area Appraisal

Long-distance views



- Key Views
- Fixed with focal point
- Dynamic
- Dynamic with focal point
- Panorama
- Panorama with focal point
- Dynamic panorama
- Dynamic panorama with focal point
- Key View reference number
- Other Views