

Footstreets and accessibility: an open community brief

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Introduction

This brief represents the varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives of the thousands of York residents who face barriers getting to, moving through, using and enjoying York city centre.

It has been prompted by the impact of the footstreets expansion, implemented in line with [government guidance](#) to provide the space for York to reopen and its economy recover while protecting the health of residents. It is a working document, to be tested and refined through ongoing community engagement.

Background

The COVID-19 response has brought a new dimension to the ongoing competition for space in York city centre. The council reorganised the city centre to allow the space for the safe reopening of York. Pedestrianised streets have been central to safe social distancing. The strategy has helped York's economic recovery; with a relatively low infection rate coupled with better performance on numbers of people and spend – consistently around 97% of pre-COVID levels - than most other cities. The extra space has given most people confidence to return to live, work and play in the city centre. 73

businesses have taken advantage of pavement café licences, with all but 15 of these lasting until next Spring. All have been asked to include a tap rail in line with [DfT inclusive Mobility](#). People have space to move about safely and customers queue, drink and eat on pavements and streets which are no longer permitted to accommodate moving or stopping vehicles.

Alternative access arrangement

This impacts upon those people who regularly accessed these streets by vehicle, including Blue Badge holders and delivery drivers. In an attempt to reduce the potential exclusion of Blue Badge holders who previously parked in the temporarily extended footstreets, the council introduced some alternative measures. Space for approximately 40 Blue Badge parking spaces had been lost, so the council introduced 40 disabled bays at Monk Bar Car Park and a shuttle taxi service to St Andrewgate. A further 14 temporary bays have been added at different [locations](#) in addition to the on-street parking on Piccadilly.

Ongoing engagement

This engagement exercise explores the impact of the footstreets extension, the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives, as well as wider issues of city centre accessibility.

We have engaged with a diverse range of disabled York residents, Blue Badge holders and advocacy groups. 367 people completed an online survey, while dozens more have completed it offline. The provisional results – based on the online survey – are included in this brief. It will be refined and the full results published once all the paper surveys are collated. 30 individuals then attended workshops, while we held targeted insight meetings with disabled groups with a combined membership/representing several thousands of York residents. The council is still trying to engage groups of learning disabilities and Deaf and hearing impaired residents to expand the range of perspectives further. The brief also draws on recent consultation and engagement over public spaces and counter terrorism measures.

The major themes

The competition for space in the ongoing economic recovery

The main issue underpinning all these conversations is the competition for space. With increasing infection rates, the possibility of further restrictions and a tougher trading environment, we have to assume that additional space is vital to the continued safe social distancing of people and significant recovery of York's economy. Many participants acknowledge these challenges, and point out that businesses should not be denied the benefit of York's share of the estimated £249bn of the 'purple pound' spending power during these challenging times.

Benefits of the footstreets (to those who can access them)

Considered in isolation, the foot streets expansion delivers benefits for most York residents, and tangible benefits for many disabled people. Disabled residents are as concerned, often more so, about the health risks associated with coronavirus and crowded spaces. The pedestrianisation of wide roads removes the need to compete with others for space on narrow and crowded pavements. The road surface is also often easier to walk on and move around than the pavements, although dropped kerbs need to be adequate and plentiful in order to actually access shops and premises.

A citywide survey in July's Our City prompted responses from 1,925 York residents. Those 165 respondents identifying as disabled expressed broadly the same levels of support as the wider population for the principles behind the extended pedestrianisation. 61% of disabled respondents agreed or strongly agreed with extending the footstreets, compared with 67% across the whole survey. On prioritising extra space for cafes and restaurants, the agree and strongly agree figures are 70.8% for the whole survey, and 70.3% for those identifying as disabled.

Just over half of respondents to a follow up survey targeting disabled residents in September's Our City agree that extra room for social distancing increases their safety, compared to a quarter that disagree. More respondents felt that fewer vehicles on pedestrianised streets increases their safety, with 44% agreeing compared to 35% disagreeing.

Blind and Partially Sighted residents in particular welcome the reduction of traffic and congestion, as their safety in shared spaces relies upon the vehicle user to see and avoid them. Extensions of the footstreets has made walking through town 'much easier' and means they do not have to worry about traffic. Although mostly in favour of the new foot streets the increase in pavement café furniture, barriers, signs and bollards does present a challenge to this group, so navigation – preferably at ground level rather than a tap rail – needs to be considered. Some consistency over use of barriers around pavement cafes would be appreciated, as it is easy to lose bearings in café tables and has forced one person to abandon their journey through Fossgate. Signs need to be bold and large, which – along with the issues over accessibility posed by cobbles and old pavements – could present a challenge to the preservation of York's heritage. Relying on help from strangers has been more difficult due to the need for social distancing.

Conflicting needs and perspectives

The engagement highlights the conflict at the heart of the impact of the footstreets. Disabled people are not a homogenous group, and their perspective inevitably differ. The desire from many for footstreets and spaces to be vehicle free while other Blue Badge holders request access to the otherwise pedestrianised roads, in some cases requesting to park within 30 metres of any shop, appear incompatible. This is also the main issue to address when considering the potential use of e-scooters and cycles within the foot streets.

Key Question:

How can we provide the space required to keep residents and visitors safe, protect jobs and make sure all our residents can access the city centre?

Key Question:

How can we resolve the tension between:

- the benefits of pedestrianisation and the impact of the space it takes away from vehicles and parking*
- the needs and aspirations of different disabled users*

The alternative measures

The alternative measures in York are well used and accessible to many, but 146 out of 368 survey respondents believed that none of the alternative measures replaced the lost parking. 80% disagree or strongly disagree that there are enough parking places which are close enough to access the city centre.

The use of the shuttle taxi service has grown, with 947 single shuttle journeys complete by 30 September. It is particularly appreciated by a core group of around 20 regulars, whose opinions we hope to add to this brief in the coming weeks. However, only 9% of the targeted survey respondents believe it is a useful service. The single drop-off and collection point limits its usefulness for many. Additional drop off points at each side of the city centre would improve this. Like the Monk Bar car park, the St Andrewgate drop-off does not have cover, seating or an accessible toilet. All these are viewed as essential if disabled people are expected to wait for any length of time. The pavement is also an issue, with some respondents saying that it forces them into the road bringing them into conflict with delivery drivers. The shuttle taxi service has also caused concerns over coronavirus risk, and the lengthy, and for some painful, process associated with transferring between vehicles.

Driving as independence, not convenience

Decisions over parking and alternatives need to reflect the fact that travel by car is more than a transport preference for many, and represents an essential need to some. A car can be a safe haven; something which allows control and independence to be exercised, a place to store medicines and give the opportunity for spontaneity.

A Blue Badge can give life-changing independence and is in itself a mitigation against inaccessibility. Alternative parking or access often require additional efforts and processes. Booking appointments to use a train, barriers which

require a third party to give access, waiting for a ramp or a specially adapted taxi can lead to stress, feelings of dependence and 'being special'.

Waiting for unknown lengths of time, away from facilities like accessible toilets and suitable seating, is a source of great anxiety for many. Some need to be able to leave an area quickly for a variety of reasons.

The same principle needs to be applied to alternative transport options for those who don't have access to a car, to Blue Badge parking or would simply prefer to travel another way.

Information makes a journey possible

Planning a journey requires detailed and accessible information, and a level of confidence that the journey will be straightforward and that the preferred transport option will be accessible. Ease of journey, coupled with greater access, is leading many to choose 'out of city' locations. Maps detailing the location and type of rest points (detailed down to whether benches have backs) would be best practice, with Chatsworth House's [accessibility map](#) identified as a positive example.

Organisations need to provide lots of detail about services to give people the independence to choose the one that best suits them. This includes where to get the service, how much it costs and times, rather than refer to a phone number to call for more information.

Many use Google Street View to establish arrangements and to plan routes. Future communications need to include pictures or very detailed maps, as Google Street View may not show a contemporary picture (for example, Dundas Street's google street view was taken in August 2019). Detailed descriptions must also be made available to blind and partially sighted people.

The fast-changing picture and lack of detail around the shuttle taxi service in the initial communications undermined confidence of some potential users. Information on the COVID-secure procedures, the taxi operators, and the process for booking a return trip and the vehicle types made at a later date were all added to the web pages, and the use of the service has grown.

Communicating the changes

The pace of the changes meant there was no 'big switch on' of the alternative measures the council put in place. The lead-in time to print and mail out to all Blue Badge holders meant the changes were introduced before the letter arrived on doormats, meaning those who read the local news and received update emails from the council knew about the changes before others. It also means that any further amendments, such as introducing extra parking bays at different locations, do not get the same treatment. It is also noted that important information to build trust in services was missing from the communications, and that wider ['Let's Be York'](#) campaign messages struck the wrong tone.

Private hire taxis and Hackney cabs (as opposed to the taxi shuttle service)

Concerns regarding coronavirus risk, the accessibility of vehicles, and the reduced capacity to be dropped closer to desired shops and services are highlighted in general discussions of taxis. One respondent reported anxiety caused by experience of taxis failing to turn up on time or be accessible when they arrived. The lack of availability of wheelchair taxis at school pick-up and drop-off time was raised. Users would like to see pooled information from on available vehicles and check understanding of what 'accessible' means, as many are suitable for some wheelchairs but not others.

Accessible parking is about both place and type of space

The majority of respondents are unable to comfortably walk very far. Government guidance states that applicants who can walk more than 80 metres and do not demonstrate very considerable difficulty in walking through any other factors would usually not be deemed as eligible for a Blue Badge. This means a relatively small increase in the footstreets area – for example extending the walk from Castlegate to Castle Car Park - can be the difference between making a journey possible or not.

It is also clear that many people have chosen their medical practitioners, shops and services because of the historic availability of close parking, and others have

‘set routes’ based on knowledge of routes, pavements and obstacles to avoid. As one respondent puts it, they have learned the ‘path of least resistance’. Moving parking, adding street furniture and other changes could force a change in well-established behaviour.

The replacement parking at St Saviourgate, Carmelite Street, Dundas Street and Duncombe Place is welcomed, but as it was introduced after the main changes means that not everyone knows about it. However, despite some of the new parking being very close to the lost parking, there is general consensus that the new parking is not ‘on the edge of the city centre’ in the way Blake Street, Lendal and Goodramgate are.

The new temporary parking closer to the city centre is also limited in numbers, leading to anxiety over the possibility that it will be full.

The type of space is as important as place

The location of the parking bays, bus stops, taxi and shuttle taxi drop-off is only part of the story. By some the city centre offer is compared unfavourably with the experience at purpose built out-of-town shopping centres like the designer outlet. However, out of town shopping centres were identified by blind respondents as being potentially dangerous, as pedestrians have to cross many open and unmarked roads. Parking needs to accommodate a ‘nose-first’ approach, with space to unload from the side and back of the vehicle. Unloading a mobility aid onto busy roads or pavements can be very difficult and stressful, and places those doing so in direct conflict with other road and pavement users, whose lack of understanding can often lead to abusive language and behaviour. Drop off points and bus stops also need to be designed to reflect the need for space.

Disabled people without a Blue Badge also share a sense of danger using parking bays. For those with guide and assistance dogs there can be limited space to get their dog in and out of the car safely, especially if they cannot hear traffic behind them.

Buses

There is currently no way to guarantee that the bus you are waiting for has room on it for a wheelchair. Even though all of York's buses meet accessible standards, there is sometimes difficulty with space for larger wheelchairs and wheeled walkers.

Many Blind and Partially Sighted people rely on buses. While some are confident travelling on buses and enjoy the fact that they are not busy, many are not traveling due to concerns about judging a 2m distance or being able to follow social distancing arrangements.

Wheelchair users report an inconsistent and unpredictable experience on public transport, which depends largely on the attitudes of fellow passengers and the confidence and willingness of drivers to implement the priority of space for disabled people. Removing time restrictions on the disabled bus pass, or removing park and ride fares, could make it a more attractive option for some. One respondent reported that their bus pass is useless as they 'have not been able to find out how to make an appointment to get the 'training' to be able to take my scooter on buses.' Another referenced limited evening and Sunday service.

Bus apps have reduced waiting times, and visual display schemes would be useful in district/secondary shopping areas.

Cycling as a mobility aid... and a perceived risk to others

The foot streets extension for disabled cyclists is potentially very positive, providing they can be allowed in – and appropriate locking facilities are available. Cycling has never been allowed in footstreets. Cycles are a mobility aid for many, so a blanket ban on cycling in the footstreets may either remove access for them or force them to switch behaviour to drive, park and use a wheelchair. This is less convenient, adds to congestion and discomfort – both as a result of transferring from vehicle to vehicle and due to the suitability of York's street surfaces when using any wheelchair. There are also concerns that introducing some cycles will lead to a 'free-for-all' of bikes on the foot streets,

and that a blue-badge style scheme may have to be operated and effectively enforced.

Any trial would need to be accompanied by an education campaign; for rangers and other security or enforcement staff to understand who and why cyclists are in the foot streets, and the public so disabled cyclists do not receive complaints or abuse while legitimately using their cycles. The shared space around York Minster is identified as unpopular and dangerous. Notably, there was confusion over whether there is a marked cycle path in this area.

The perceived risk of cyclists in pedestrianised areas is a serious concern highlighted by both Blind and Partially-Sighted respondents and the Age Friendly York group. One suggestion is to clearly mark cycling routes using textured surfaces, and for cyclists to be asked to use bells to warn people that they are approaching junctions. There are also differing perspectives on shared spaces. Some believe the shared spaces slow cyclists down, which has been the council's rationale for using them, while others believe physical lines segregating the areas work better. One participant observed that it is often pedestrians in the cycle lane that will often force cyclists onto the pedestrian side of the paths.

Off-street parking

One Blue Badge Holder requested an increase in the amount of Blue Badge parking in Piccadilly. Well-lit, open car parks are preferred but those closest to town, like Castle, have the worst surface and smallest spaces. Non Blue-Badge holders highlight the cost of parking in York, and the size of spaces in Castle car park as major factors pushing them to shop in cheaper, non-pedestrianised centres nearby.

Key question:

The multi-storey car parks are in the right locations and offer the opportunities for larger amounts of parking, but are not popular. How do we make disabled parking more useable and attractive in multi-storeys?

The council's multi-storey car parks offer proximity to the city centre, but several issues need to be addressed before they are viewed as an option by many.

There are several design features which need to be considered:

- Some of those concerns are common to all drivers, in particular concerns about security and a risk of being trapped by a failed lift. If a lift is not working, this information should be available before a driver enters the car park, and preferably before they start their journey.
- Ticket machines need to be accessible.
- Type of space is as important as place (see below)
- Disabled parking in an area where there is no through traffic between the vehicle and the exit
- Visibility to/of drivers backing out is essential
- Height restrictions in all car parks exclude some models of adapted vehicles. Where the height barriers are removed, this needs to be communicated to Blue Badge holders.

Shopmobility and scooters/wheelchairs

Shopmobility is identified as a useful and good service within workshops over the foot streets and counter-terrorism, but is clearly not viewed as an option for all. For a number of residents, it has been used as an introduction to mobility scooters and power chairs before buying one. Limitations to the service have been highlighted throughout the engagement. Its location in Piccadilly multi-storey puts some off using it, while the cost and opening times are also highlighted as barriers to use for many. One participant commented that hiring one 'where I park' would be useful, with others highlighting the hubs in Amsterdam and London. Previous engagement has highlighted the need for more concerted marketing of Shopmobility to residents, with a more effective web presence a key priority. The pandemic interrupted this work.

Buying your own electric wheelchair or mobility scooter is expensive, requires home storage and may require a second person or expensive vehicle adaptations to load and unload it.

Moving through town

There are many parts of York's medieval city centre which are viewed as 'no go' for many disabled users, with streets like the Shambles combining crowds, cobbles and narrow pavements. Narrow or poor quality pavements and cobbles, like those at College Green, can often force people into the road.

While there is a general acceptance that York's special historic character presents some barriers, there remain many opportunities to improve accessibility in the rest of the city.

- Disabled residents report that many of the surfaces and pathways are slippery, uneven and narrow, providing trip hazards and making journeys using mobility aids and wheelchairs painful and difficult. They often take the 'path of least resistance', which can involve the road itself. Some kerbs are not 'properly dropped'. The location and proximity of a parking space is only useful if the journey is smooth.
- Electric wheelchairs can help overcome the issues of distance, but the poor surfaces can still lead to discomfort.
- Tactile surfaces can be difficult with mobility aids, these are not necessarily viewed as the ideal solution by Blind and Partially Sighted residents, but they are accepted as the only real option. Lighting and coloured surfaces have been suggested in past consultations.
- Level routes to town are preferred, and are more important than proximity for some people - especially for those propelling or pushing a wheelchair. Some routes don't have any dropped kerbs, some are too steep, and some have a dip between the pavement and the road where the wheel gets stuck. Frequent rest points are vital, along with a system which identifies priority for those with mobility needs, (requested every 15 metres) as are accessible toilets. There are too few places to stop and rest in York city centre, and routes from access points like car parks should be prioritised.
- An accessible land train moving through the city centre has been raised both in the survey and workshops. While it would not be a solution for all users or replace blue badge parking in the city centre.

Time and timing

Time is a limiting factor. Previous consultations have identified that many Blue Badge holders feel the three-hour restriction on double yellow lines is not long enough to do several things, especially engage in leisure like eating out or going to the cinema.

Some disabled people are able and choose to visit the city centre before the morning foot streets restrictions begin. However, this is not an option for many for a variety of reasons, including set times for carer support.

They will often be competing with delivery drivers looking to do the same. The extension into the evening makes accessing the shops before they close more difficult. This is a particular issue with services like banks, many of which have shortened their opening hours. The evening extension has affected some user's ability to attend evening groups on SpurrierGate and at Friends' Meeting House.

A changing city

The footstreets extension is not the only thing which has changed in the city centre. City centres have been changing rapidly, with key services like banks, post offices and many retailers altering services as customer behaviours change. The coronavirus has accelerated some of the anticipated impacts on city centres, and the true long-term impact on customer behaviour and the market's response will become clear over the next 12 months.

Some banks, for example, have shortened opening hours and the Co-op is closing its city centre branch, a trend which is expected to become increasingly common as more and more services move online. These will exacerbate the impacts of the changes to the city centre and the foot streets. One shop which many residents reference as a major reason to visit the city centre, but is now inaccessible, announced plans to down-size its premises even before the pandemic.

Major regenerations of the Castle Gateway, York Central and other parts of the city will provide new public spaces, destinations, transport routes and places to work for all residents, and the locations and types of shops and services will change alongside these.

What enables and what stops me

Around half the respondents to the online survey (September Our City) have identified barriers to enjoying the city centre for the full range of what it has to offer; working, learning, shopping, leisure and accessing services and healthcare.

The majority of these cite the new parking measures as the main barrier, but there are other reasons identified to consider.

As well as the quality of surfaces identified above, the shops themselves feature heavily. Many of the shops in town, even modern buildings and recent conversions, are inaccessible. Getting a shop's attention to utilise temporary ramp access, if available, is often difficult. A campaign to increase local shop's awareness of the size of the disabled market, accommodations they can make to attract the purple pound, and use of AccessAble guides to promote good businesses, could encourage businesses to act.

Kindness and empathy

The engagement is littered with examples of respondents reporting hostile behaviour towards them. This ranges from general impatience to verbal abuse, and a failure of many to consider disability in their daily behaviour.

Other issues have been raised which will be shared with relevant colleagues and partners including:

- Assessments of pavement surfaces should not be done by non-disabled people. Lived experience has to be represented in decisions.
- Sighted guidance is now allowed under coronavirus rules, but only if members of the person's household is providing it. Blind people who live alone are potentially very limited in movement elsewhere.
- Exclusion from food shopping due to government decisions regarding clinical vulnerability; online shopping slots reserved for others. · living in the city centre – being able to get home deliveries has become much more difficult.
- Traffic lights no longer make a noise, or don't make a noise long enough to allow good time to cross the road
- A request to audit public transport to the [hospital](#). Getting to the hospital is fine, but the bus stop to leave is a long way away.