

# Wakefield Civic Society (West Yorkshire) – Written evidence (HSC0004)

## Promoting pride of place in a small city centre: the perspective and role of a Civic Society

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### Introduction

Wakefield Civic Society (WCS) is a charity affiliated to the national civic movement, Civic Voice. Founded in 1964 as a counter to the demolition programmes that typified city centre planning at that time, WCS currently has a growing membership of over 300 people and organisations. The charity's area of benefit is a small city located in a larger local authority of the same name whose suburbs and settlements possess, on average, a relatively low level of social amenities and infrastructure, a relatively high level of economic inactivity and a history of economic decline.<sup>1</sup> The mission of the Society is to make Wakefield 'a better place in which to live, work and relax'-<sup>2</sup> a mission that means a particular interest in the city centre and its future. In more general terms, WCS seeks to promote pride in place, as is a central theme in the 'Levelling-Up' policy agenda<sup>3</sup> and is particularly important in areas of decline or neglect.

WCS has been represented on the Wakefield High Street Task Force/ Town Board since its inception and its President has acted as Chair for about 18 months. This report has been prepared independently after consultation with WCS Trustees, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the HSTF/ Town Board.

### Q1: 'How do you define a high street in a town or small city and what is its purpose?'

A 'high street' may be conventionally defined as an area of concentrated retail activity. However, 'high street' is not a local term in Wakefield. There is no named 'High Street', other than in a few outlying villages and a focus on retail fails to recognise all the causes of local economic decline. A better term is the 'city centre' covering not just retail, but streets and areas in use for public administration, business, offices and the night time economy. As is suggested by its name, the purpose of a city centre is to act as a centre for social, cultural and administrative activities. The centre is also commonly the oldest part of a city, offering a repository of historic buildings and streets. For this reason, a town or city centre has a symbolic purpose, and contributes to the identity of a place.

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<sup>1</sup> Leeds Centre for Dante Studies *Wakefield: Heaven, Purgatory or Hell?: Local Trust/ OCSI Left Behind*: Pike et al 'Left behind places': Tomaney, *Understanding the UK's left-behind places*.

<sup>2</sup> Trickett, *Blue Plaques*.

<sup>3</sup> HMG, *Levelling Up*, pp.206-227

## **Q2: 'What should be included on high streets to meet the needs of the whole community?'**

A centre of a city such as Wakefield should comprise (and commonly does comprise) a multi-functional area that offers a wide range of services to the local community, including green space and a public transport hub. City centre retail is likely to be less important in the future than in the past, but is conveniently located for many consumers and should not be eliminated or allowed to disappear. The retention of a sizeable retail centre is also desirable to promote competition, innovation and diversity of choice. The provision of offices and office employment is more problematic in an area such as Wakefield with a low demand for such uses. Measures should be taken to protect and grow employment where this continues to exist, for example in local professional services and in arts, crafts and the cultural sector.

A city centre is more than a functional area. Considered as a place, a town or city centre has a cultural and experiential dimension. The Levelling-up White Paper mentions the need for 'beauty'.<sup>4</sup> Beauty is only one aspect, however. Place has a broad sensory dimension.<sup>5</sup> It is about the feeling of being somewhere. Good practice in placemaking therefore requires Councils to look after and maintain their city centre streets. It also requires the protection of heritage and public education to explain the evolution of the local urban landscape and its association with significant men and women. These latter concerns have been central to the activities of WCS and local heritage groups, notably the Historical Society and The Forgotten Women of Wakefield. Activities have included the installation of blue plaques, the creation of town trails and the publication of historical leaflets.

Supported by the Arts Council and the local authority, the promotion of culture and creative industries has also become a central driver for local economic growth.<sup>6</sup> Creative industries have the advantage of raising skill levels and promoting labour market diversity. The city centre has, moreover, proved a viable location for cultural and creative activities, as represented by a cluster of facilities comprising the Theatre Royal, Westgate Art Studios, the Art House and a performing arts school, CAPA college. The existence of a cultural cluster does not mean, however, that city centre planning can easily create a distinct cultural quarter. Some of the most important cultural resources such as the Hepworth Museum, Production Park (a facility for live events) and Yorkshire Sculpture Park are located either on the edge of or well away from the city centre. A process of piecemeal development, a policy preference to avoid overconcentration in Wakefield city and the different needs of different industries, have led to the dispersal of cultural resources across the District.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> HMG, *Levelling Up*, p.206

<sup>5</sup> Dobson, 'Boosterism and belonging', p's 171-72: Ingold, *Being alive*: Madgin et al Connecting physical and social dimensions of place attachment: Madgin & Robson, *Developing a People-Centred, Place-Led Approach*, p's 6 & 7.

<sup>6</sup> Arts Council, *Capital case study Wakefield*: Goodchild, 'Replanning the central area of Wakefield'

<sup>7</sup> Goodchild, 'Replanning the central area of Wakefield', p.8.

**Q3: 'What are the obstacles to bringing underused property on the high streets back into use?'**

WCS has accepted the case for limited demolition of low demand or obsolete property, especially if this enables the creation of new open space, as for example in Wakefield around the Cathedral. WCS has, nevertheless, urged a cautious approach to demolition and has generally preferred rehabilitation of the building stock or the temporary use of empty property, for example as pop up shops for the display and sale of art and craft products.

There are many reasons for a preference in favour of rehabilitation- the public attachment to the built environment in its existing form, the retention of embodied carbon, the need for intensive consultation of affected parties and the timing difficulties involved in co-ordinating demolition with rebuilding. Demolition without rebuilding merely results in an increase in vacant sites. In the past few years higher than expected inflation in building costs has been a further obstacle to redevelopment. Redevelopment is invariably more expensive than rehabilitation. In Wakefield, grant aided rehabilitation funded by Historic England for a Heritage Action Zone has also proved quicker to implement. WCS notes that the Council has recently initiated a related grant-aided programme for retail. Grant-aided improvement and related activities such as opening unused upper floorspace are often staff intensive. There have been obstacles to the take-up of grant aid owing to the mixed response of property owners and, as in redevelopment, the impact of building cost inflation.

**Q4: Who is involved in ensuring a thriving local high street and does the current structure of Government support facilitate those groups in working together?**

The regeneration of a town or city centre requires collaboration between three main sets of actors: the local council (or councils in areas of multi-tier government), business groups and civic-minded organisations. In Wakefield, as in most other places, collaboration operates through a 'Town Board', an advisory body that makes recommendations to the Council and receives project updates and progress reports. However, the shape and content of public investment is generally determined by Council submissions to Government. The submissions are commonly complex; they respond to criteria that are sometimes unclear; and may fail to realize additional funds, despite the work involved in their preparation. For these reasons, present arrangements can prove frustrating to all concerned.

The funding arrangements generally require a contribution from private investors or are confined to artistic activities and heritage. The arrangements do not in their present form encourage health, social and public recreational facilities or the involvement of the agencies responsible for such facilities. The funding and coordinating regime should be reviewed so that it can better incorporate all the functions of a city centre.

**Q5: What role does the planning process have in determining the success or failure of the high street locally and is it fully able to address the challenges high streets face?**

The preparation in 2020 and 2021 of an advisory plan by the consultants Farrells and entitled 'This is Wakefield' had a beneficial impact in promoting public discussion about the future of the city centre, in indicating the need for change and in providing a flexible strategy for the future. <sup>8</sup> As part of the public discussion, WCS prepared and published its own study of how the city centre might best be replanned. <sup>9</sup>

The Farrells plan is usually presented as a 'masterplan', but this is a misnomer. A masterplan generally refers to a blueprint for a development project and is inappropriate for the management of 'high streets' and other areas either in decline or experiencing rapid, unpredictable change. <sup>10</sup> The Farrells Plan is instead an adaptive advisory plan that promotes a 'flexible' and 'adaptable' city centre- 'a multi-functional place of cultural, social and economic exchange'. <sup>11</sup> WCS fully endorsed the vision eventually adopted by Farrells and the Council, with its advocacy of a mixed use, people-focused environment. In addition, WCS has endorsed proposals for 'green and blue' areas, for movement, heritage and culture and adaptability. An adaptive advisory plan has the potential to address all the main challenges, though much still depends on the ability of the local council and others to implement the plan and translate its principles into viable projects and proposals.

WCS also has experience of involvement in a statutory District-wide Local Plan that was prepared concurrently with the city centre advisory plan and eventually adopted by the Council in 2024 after an Examination in Public. <sup>12</sup> The Local Plan spatial strategy is mostly about the promotion of very large employment land allocations close to the motorway network, mostly for warehousing. As such, the proposals are likely to encourage crosstown traffic, including traffic that crosses the city centre and may also encourage the continued decentralisation of local professional employment away from the city centre. Preparation of the Local Plan failed to generate public comment beyond property interests. In its present form, the Local Plan is mostly either irrelevant or damaging to city centre regeneration.

To summarise, town and city centre regeneration is best supported neither by a Local Plan nor by a conventional master plan, but by a flexible, adaptive advisory plan.

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<sup>8</sup> Farrells, *This is Wakefield*.

<sup>9</sup> WCS, *Our Vision for Wakefield*.

<sup>10</sup> Powe, *Redesigning Town Centre Planning*:

<sup>11</sup> Farrells. *This is Wakefield*, p.60

<sup>12</sup> Wakefield Council, *Local Plan 2036*

**Q6: What has been the impact of national level planning policies regarding high streets in the last five years and are any changes required?**

National planning policy has involved a contradiction between deregulation and the practicalities of city centre management. In terms of deregulation, measures have been introduced to extend permitted development to allow changes from typical 'high street uses', such as shops and financial services, to alternative uses, such as offices and healthcare services, without planning permission. <sup>13</sup> In August 2020, the government extended the regime for permitted development to allow for new homes to be created through upward extensions on existing homes, blocks of flats and buildings in mixed or commercial use, subject to their external impact. <sup>14</sup> Other consultation exercises are currently ongoing to enable rebuilding and modifications without permission.

At the same time, modifications to the use classes order in August 2020 and to the permitted development order in April 2021 have required the provision of adequate light in all habitable rooms in housing and have also specified floorspace standards for all homes created as a result of conversion from non-residential use. <sup>15</sup> These latter provisions have sought to prevent very poor quality housing as had been allowed from an earlier exercise of deregulation. WCS remains concerned about the poor quality of housing created through the conversion of existing premises or through subdivision into multi-occupation. It is not always clear, however, whether poor housing standards have been permitted owing to national legislation or national guidance or local interpretations. The operation of the use classes order and the permitted development order deserves a thorough review and simplification in the light of recent changes.

The control of development, undertaken through the town planning and related legislation, remains an essential tool in urban management. WCS spends much time every month commenting on planning applications. WCS also provides technical advice to planning officers, for example on the historical evidence that indicates the shape and appearance of a façade in the past. Much of Wakefield city centre comprises listed buildings of various levels, from locally listed to Grade 1 listed buildings, or is covered by a network of conservation areas where control is, in any case, relatively stringent. Deregulation of planning control could easily have damaging consequences if this reduces the protection given to heritage buildings and areas. In addition, Government has emphasised the role of improved design in town and city centre remodelling and management. <sup>16</sup> Maintenance of a high standard of design requires a high level of planning control and commonly different skills from planning officers. In this context, local authorities should be encouraged to employ a sufficient number of staff with the correct skills.

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<sup>13</sup> Rankle, *Planning in England*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.12

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 24

<sup>16</sup> MCHLG, *Build Back Better High Streets*, p.34

**Q7: What should be done to ensure that high streets being redeveloped now are structurally and financially resilient for future societal changes?**

Resilience is best promoted by a diverse centre, with a wide range of functions and a planning process that enables adaptability and flexibility. As stated in the response to Q3, WCS has generally favoured rehabilitation rather than redevelopment.

To maintain and promote business and public confidence, the public realm needs to be managed and maintained. Without active management, including co-ordination with the police, town and city centres can be prone to anti-social behaviour, including drug and alcohol abuse, rough sleeping, etc, so leading to reduced attractiveness and footfall. WCS notes that, in Wakefield, a Management Board has recently been established for this purpose. In addition, without maintenance of both buildings and the public realm, an area soon looks neglected. The business cases submitted for public funding of redevelopment or rehabilitation work must therefore include sufficient revenue budgets for maintenance beyond the initial contract liability period.

**Q8: How can spatial planning, street design and layout help to drive greater footfall to high streets?**

There is consistent international evidence that the pedestrianisation of a street leads to higher levels of pedestrian use, as well as having other benefits such as a reduction in air pollution and the creation of more external space for greenery, recreation and outdoor dining.<sup>17</sup> Pedestrianisation can take various forms- full pedestrianisation with road closure and vehicular access restricted to emergency vehicles; part-time pedestrianisation with vehicular access at specific times; and traffic calming intended to slow down vehicles through detailed design measures, including the creation of cycle lanes and wider footpaths. All these measures reallocate road space from traffic to other uses.

Pedestrianisation and traffic calming are not a panacea in promoting footfall. Much still depends on the attractions available on the street. Special arrangements are also required for disabled people and buses. Further, eliminating or slowing down traffic results in a very different looking city centre to that in the past and does not appeal to those business groups who believe in the importance of direct car access. The private car is still the most popular travel mode for all journey purposes.

In Wakefield, the area around the Cathedral has been pedestrianized for many years. In July 2020, a temporary road closure was made to another street, Northgate, in response to the Covid health emergency and a national policy initiative in favour of active travel and walking. The Covid road closure was supported by WCS, but was undertaken very quickly, with little consultation and with minimal landscaping. It was opposed by property owners in the vicinity and later withdrawn. No further road closures or traffic calming measures have subsequently been made in the city centre. In Sheffield, similar road closures received a favourable public reaction, whilst elsewhere, in Lancashire for

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<sup>17</sup> Soni and Soni. 'Benefits of pedestrianization ...'

example, the experience was mixed.<sup>18</sup> In Wakefield and in other town and city centres, there is still scope for the reallocation of road space to other uses, but the lesson is that this should be done after consultation and with adequate resources to permit attractive hard and soft landscaping.

**Q9: Has the High Streets Taskforce been effective in providing support and expertise in high street recovery and what should this look like in the future?**

The national High Streets Taskforce (HSTF) reports that it has been active in providing advice on the remodelling of an area near the Cathedral in Wakefield. Apart from a recent presentation,<sup>19</sup> however, members of WCS have had little contact with the HSTF. It is unclear, moreover, whether the terms of reference of the HSTF cover the problems of long-term decline in other streets, in mostly non-retail uses. The problem in Wakefield city centre is one of building decay, derelict sites and lack of demand from occupiers and potential occupiers in an extensive area in a combination of current uses and former uses- retail, hospitality, industrial and offices.

**Q10: How can transport connectivity be improved to facilitate better access to high streets and town centres and how should this be funded?**

While WCS recognises the importance of transport connectivity, especially bus and public transport connectivity, we have no particular expertise and experience on this question.

**Q11: To what extent are the Government's funding programmes to support high streets, such as the Town Deals and Future High Street, successful?**

The funding available under the Towns Fund, Town Deals and similar initiatives has encouraged Wakefield Council, like other local authorities, to focus on the regeneration of existing urban centres and to work out development and regeneration projects that it would not have otherwise attempted. For example, in evidence to the Local Plan Examination, the Council stated that, in the absence of additional regeneration funds, it had ceased searching for brownfield sites for new housing and preferred, instead, to rely on existing mostly greenfield site allocations or to identify new Green Belt sites that could be allocated for housing on 'exceptional grounds'.<sup>20</sup> The availability of Government funds is therefore a prerequisite for regeneration in Wakefield's city centre.

For the main redevelopment projects preliminary work, such as site acquisition, has started but not the building work. The grant-funded repair and rehabilitation work in the Heritage Zone has had more of an immediate impact, as have the various arts and cultural initiatives, with their sculptures, wall murals and pop-up shops in vacant property. Cultural investment within and outside the city centre has started to offer new narratives about the contribution

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<sup>18</sup> Parkes et al. *Room to Move*, p.33.

<sup>19</sup> HSTF, Local Roadshow, Wakefield

<sup>20</sup> Wakefield Council, 'Green Belt Exceptional Circumstances Statement', paras.5.5-5.12.

of Wakefield to the world of art, independent of its association with industries that have largely disappeared. The success of current regeneration strategies will take some years to assess.

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