

Towards a new vision for Derby city centre: Ambition 2022

*TINKERING AROUND THE EDGES IS NO LONGER ENOUGH AND WE NEED TO DEVELOP A **CLEAR, BOLD AND IMPORTANTLY COLLECTIVE** VISION TO TACKLE ISSUES HEAD ON AND TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THE CITY CENTRE HAS A LONG TERM FUTURE.*

In presenting their intentions to address the future of their city centre, Derby City Council has sought to be ambitious and bold and to ask local citizens to help shape that vision. There is a recognition that the global pandemic and the impact of the actions to prevent its spread have had a dramatic impact on the city centre. But there is also acknowledgement that some of the challenges predate and are unrelated to the Covid 19 events. The outcome of the consultations and the vision for the future of the city centre will be published later in 2023, forming the context for future development and planning.

The Ambition 2022 consultation document is welcome in another respect. In a frank assessment of the current situation, they pointed to how long term issues are at the heart of the challenge. The over-reliance on a declining retail market for its economic base and a limited provision of housing and office markets to encourage city centre living may have been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic but reflect past planning and development. They appreciate that there has been a downward spiral for the city centre. The cycle of falling footfall, vacant premises, problems with crime and anti-social behaviour and a perception of decline has to be addressed.

But are these “unprecedented challenges” as the Ambition document describes them? Are they different to the challenges which have been acknowledged in previous city centre plans? If not, are they challenges which a city council is able to address or are they too ‘wicked’?

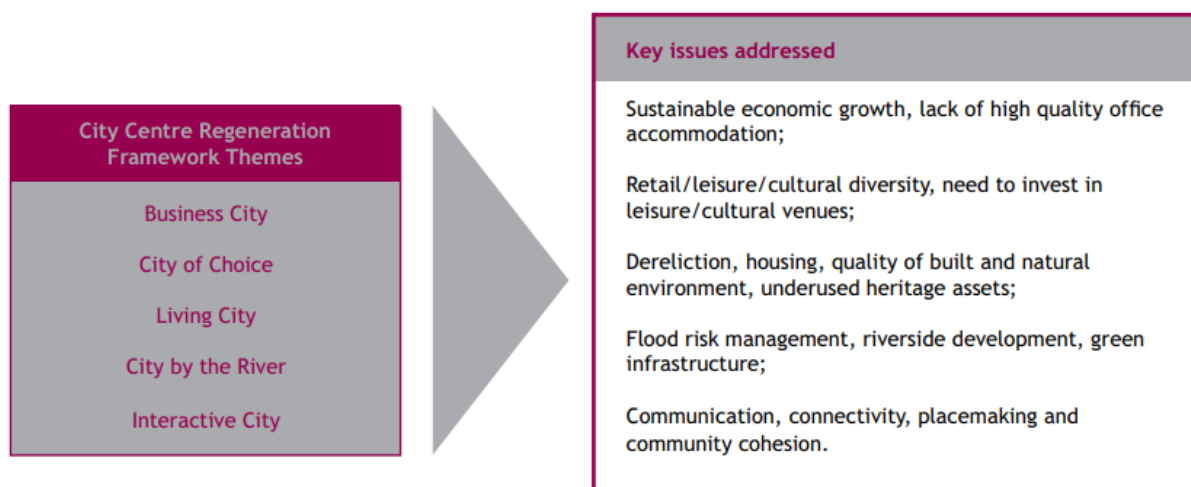
In this review, we outline the challenges presented in the two preceding city centre plans for Derby – the 2012 Framework and the 2016 Masterplan - each of which focusing on the regeneration other area to consider:

- a) The long timescales over which transformation of the city centre space and fabric takes place;
- b) The nature of the regeneration proposed at each period and assess whether this was ‘tinkering’;
- c) The changing role of the City Council in the process of transformation




Derby City Centre Regeneration Framework, January 2012

In making a case for a new framework to influence, guide and steer developments, promote regeneration and improve the built and natural environments of the city centre, the Council approved this plan. It was designed :

1. to build on achievements delivered in the previous 5 years in term of public space (£50m on public realm and highway improvements), hotel capacity (470 beds), homes (400), new office space (93,000 sq m approved), new retail space in Westfield shopping centre (68,000 sq m) and 64 historic shop-fronts restored.
2. To address issues (figure below) that were viewed as detrimental to the long-term vibrancy and success of the city centre; emphasizing the need for action to realise the economic and cultural potential of the city as a whole.



At the centre of the action plan associated with the framework was a list of 12 priority projects. The intention was that over the next five years (2012-6) these projects would be initiated. As the figure below illustrates, these projects are dominated by commercial-led (4), retail (1) or mixed use including retail/commercial (4) with only one each relating to heritage and culture and to transport. In emphasizing these 12 proposed developments, the framework suggested that the majority included sites that were of strategic importance to developers and were largescale sites with planning permission. Only three – the heritage and transport project and the proposed redevelopment of the former Debenhams site – were involving the City Council directly.

1		Friar Gate Square Planning permission granted for commercial development (9,500 sq mts offices + 500 sq mts retail). Developer: Lowbridge	7		Riverlights Phase 2 Planning permission granted for mixed use development including residential (140 apartments), leisure and commercial uses. Potential location for indoor swimming pool. Developer: Riverlights
2		City Gate House Planning permission granted for commercial development (7700 sq mts offices + 350 sq mts retail). Developer: Cedar House	8		Becket Well (former Debenhams site + Duckworth Square) Mixed use development DCC to prepare option appraisal.
3		Central Square (Cathedral Road site) Planning permission granted for commercial development (4,707 sq mts offices). Developer: Bolsterstone St Mary's Gate: Commercial development (500 sq mts offices) Developer: Clowes	9		Friar Gate Goods Yard Planning application submitted for mixed use development for residential and commercial uses, plus retail (12,500 sq mts) development on a historic site. Developer: Clowes
4		Sadler Square Planning permission granted for commercial mixed use development. Potential location for the proposed Cathedral Quarter Enterprise Centre. Developer: To be appointed	10		Nightingale Quarter (Former DRI site) Planning application submitted for mixed use development. Potential location for the indoor swimming pool. Developer: DRI Hospital Trust
5		No.1 Cathedral Green (Former Magistrate's Court site) Planning permission granted for commercial led mixed use development on heritage site (6,100 sq mts offices). Developer: Wilson Boden	11		Castleward Mixed use urban village (circa 800 homes) Developer partner: Compendium Living North Castleward (One Derby) Commercial development (50,000 sq mts offices + 600 sq mts retail + 104 bed hotel) Developer: Norseman
6		Silk Mill Enhancement of the Silk Mill is planned under the Museums Transformation Programme to develop this southern gateways to the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site as a major visitor attraction.	12		Railway Station A masterplan is in place for the regeneration of this area. The first phase of work to improve the platforms and the refurbishment of a disused office building is now complete. Improvement work on the transport interchange is due to start soon.

Priority Projects 14

Together these 'transformational' projects formed the building blocks for enabling Derby centre to be a thriving commercial hub, a retail, leisure and culture destination, and a beacon for quality design and cherished heritage.

Derby City Centre Masterplan 2030: vision, ambition, delivery

Five years on and in July 2026 the Council set out its new Derby City Centre Masterplan. This acknowledged that despite many of the above projects and other having being developed or started, "our city centre experience doesn't universally reflect our high performing, high-technology economy". Listing a list of challenges and opportunities (see table below) the masterplan was designed to maintain momentum on city centre regeneration by maximising opportunities.

- A fundamental transformation of city centres in response to changes in retail, leisure and commercial activities

- Need for stronger city centre identity

- Viability challenges on key vacant and derelict sites

- Opportunity to improve accessibility and better connect the city centre with neighbourhoods and key businesses

- Riverside regeneration opportunity and delivery of the Our City Our River programme

- Growth opportunity for the evening and night time economy

- Market opportunity for new performance and events space

- Quality of the built environment and numerous heritage assets

- Political will and partnership approach to city centre development

- Spend and footfall attracted to the city by the intu shopping centre and Cathedral Quarter

- Business engagement through the Cathedral Quarter and St Peters Quarter Business Improvement Districts

- Growing momentum in city living

- Investment in quality public realm

- Super-fast digital connectivity and availability of public wi-fi

In a significant shift in emphasis, the 2016 action plan puts considerable emphasis on the role of civic partners in shaping and advancing projects. The creation of a new performance arena, for example, was to be led by the Regeneration team and this team was to lead ‘Reinvent the Guildhall Market Place’ and have ‘a direct role in facilitating a viable redevelopment scheme for Becketwell’ (the former Debenhams department store). Similarly, the redevelopment of Silk Mill (project 6 in the 2012 framework) was to be led by Derby Museum Trust and the Council would work with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to lever benefits from Derby’s Housing Zone Status to unlock new residential development.

In contrast to the project-site led development highlighted in the 2012 plan, the narrative of the updated masterplan emphasized a broader scale of delivery of the priority areas. Whilst there were still key beacon projects – the arena, Market Place and Becketwell – in other areas the focus was on how the Council would use its funding to support more general interventions. Thus, in responding to the need for quality workspaces for growing business, especially in the Information Technology sector, “larger office units are in short supply and this market failure is holding back business growth. We are exploring funding for new office development to address this gap.” And in the area of conservation and heritage, city centre wide support was made available through Townscape Heritage Initiative offering “grants towards renovating and refurbishing buildings, which brings both conservation and economic benefits”.

Together, the desire was to increase the vibrancy of the city centre, contributing to the city wide plans to make Derby a CITY OF CHOICE (leisure, cultural and retail destination), LIVING CITY (for lifestyle and housing choice), a BUSINESS CITY with a successful central business district and a CONNECTED smart CITY.

Is the Ambition 2022 approach more than tinkering?

In one critical sense only time will tell as realizing the scale of ambition can only be assessed in the coming years. But there are indications that the approach adopted by the City Council is different in some key ways to that of the past.

Different scale

The 2022 consultative proposals mark a shift in scale from the earlier plans for the city centre. These focused on working with key stakeholders to construct individual developments. The resulting development was site-specific, targeted to make constructive use of opportunities to contribute to the city centre wide goals. The current proposal is described as “more on creating an overarching framework for how we want to see it [the centre] transformed over the long term”. Consideration is being given to the spaces between new (re-)development sites – reviewing what is already existing. This more holistic approach has the potential advantage first of stronger connection between changes and the current cityscape and second of appreciating that some change may be needed to aspects of the centre not earmarked for development. Thus, for example, in redeveloping the Becketwell site changes to neighbouring property and the public realm may be necessary and desirable to ensure that the redevelopment has maximum benefit to the centre as a whole.

Different role

This shift to a city centre wide approach has a further benefit. It gives the City Council and its associated public agencies a great lead role in progressing plans. This marks a further enhancement of their role from the limited regulatory role that characterized the 2012 plans and the collaborative partnerships in 2016. Of course delivering the plans will need investment

and delivery with non-public agencies, but there is greater scope to bring public (local and national) resources to leverage wider impact of the investment by commercial partners.

Different consultation

Reflecting this more holistic approach, there has been more active and wider consultation that has the potential to get a strong consensus on the future vision. Whereas the previous plans did engaged with key stakeholders – those partners who were likely to be involved in the investment, development and construction process and the end-use of facilities – the 2022 process has gone beyond this. Throughout 2021 and 2022 the Council had been talking to stakeholders to understand the issues facing the city centre and as they described it “to get to grips with some of the potential ideas, interventions and opportunities that could help to transform it”. The wider consultation asking a range of questions, based around a set of themes (see our separate document on the FCCN website) has looked beyond getting support for specific projects to gauge whether the ideas, direction of travel, and ambition is sufficient. the reaction to our ideas and assess whether we are thinking along the right lines. In taking this more inclusive and participatory approach, there is a clear signal that alternative ideas and thoughts are welcome BEYOND what is being suggested.

Different outcome?

We await the publication of the final vision document and will track over the coming years how progress in being made in Derby. We wish them well and hope that there is indeed a different and positive outcome of a vibrant, sustainable city centre.