



# WAKEFIELD CIVIC SOCIETY

*Building interest in Wakefield since 1964*

## **Wakefield Civic Society offers ‘cautious support’ for proposals for new Cathedral Quarter in Wakefield City Centre**

### **1. Introduction**

Today, the Society offers cautious support for the Council’s proposals to create a new ‘Cathedral Quarter’ in Wakefield’s city centre.

Shopping habits have changed markedly in recent years, and more people now work from home; city centres must adapt and evolve to keep pace with these and other changes in society, they cannot remain frozen in time.

The Society recognises that Cathedral Quarter is a bold and ambitious project that will transform Wakefield city centre, creating new opportunities for local businesses, residents and visitors alike, and we welcome the further investment being made in the city.

We appreciate that the initial announcement is more about principle than detail and we look forward to engaging in the forthcoming consultation exercise where concerns can be shared and discussed. Experience tells us that the detailed plans will likely be somewhat different to the CGI / ‘artist’s impressions’ used to accompany the announcement.

Getting the details right will be vital to the success of the project.

### **2. Discussion**

Town and city centres are not static, they evolve over time to respond to demographic, technological, commercial and cultural changes. Some of that change is organic, driven by individuals and businesses, some of it is strategic, driven by local and national policies – accompanied by an injection of hard cash in response to perceived and actual problems.

Wakefield’s fortunes, like those of other towns and cities, have waxed and waned over the centuries. From being the centre of the former medieval Manor of Wakefield, one of the largest in the north of England, to becoming the administrative centre of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Wakefield has played a prominent role in local, regional and even national history. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the major part of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Wakefield was a

recognised centre for retail, administration and leisure. The opening of innovative and ground-breaking Ridings shopping centre in 1983 cemented the city's status as a centre for shopping – and so novel and futuristic was it that coach tours came to Wakefield to see this modern marvel of the retail age.

But times – and habits – change and Wakefield is not immune from the effects of those changes.

England was once a mostly agrarian economy where much of the country's population lived outside towns and cities and earned their living on the land. The 18<sup>th</sup> century 'agricultural revolution' saw population levels rise as food production increased and more people moving to live in towns and cities in search of work. The 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution brought more people into urban centres where factories and other means of production were located.

Go back 200 years or so and Wakefield was home to a number of coaching inns with stabling for several hundred horses. People came to Wakefield for the markets; it was a centre for trade and commerce. The arrival of the railways, then trams and private cars, put an end to the stage coaches, of course, and no one would seriously want to revert to those times now. Yet 'modern' transport modes did more than bring convenience, they also made commuting possible and, post-World War I, people moved in increasing numbers to live in suburban settlements – some even 'escaped' back to the country. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most people had moved out of Wakefield city centre and were living elsewhere while car ownership and accessible public transport increased the possibilities for travel to out-of-town shopping centres.

Although Wakefield has held up reasonably well compared to other towns and cities of similar size, city centre footfall started to decline with the advent of out of town shopping centres – something that arguably started here with the Meadowhall Centre opening in 1990 and which began to pull shoppers out of nearby town and city centres, and then came the White Rose Centre in 1997. People were attracted by the variety of shops and, of course, free parking (although they didn't always seem to factor in the cost of travelling to these centres). The Ridings was extremely popular when it first opened in the 1980s, but it was soon overtaken by the scale of out-of-town retail and leisure offerings (including Xscape at Glasshoughton, opening in 2003).

We have also seen a number of out-of-town business parks created around the periphery of the city, further reducing footfall within the city centre itself. Those office workers who might have spent their lunch breaks visiting the city centre shops, cafés and sandwich bars are long since a thing of the past.

Shopping habits have changed markedly in our lifetimes. The introduction of supermarkets and self-service stores, which started after World War II but which expanded rapidly in the 1960s, out-of-town retail centres and then the advent of on-line shopping, have brought us to where we are today.

The decline in footfall accelerated massively as a result of lockdown during the ‘Covid years’ but it wasn’t just shopping that moved on-line. In fact, the impact on footfall that can be attributed to the internet is much wider. Lockdown spurred many organisations to find ways of continuing their operations on-line (we ourselves moved to on-line talks and meetings during lockdown and have continued to offer live streaming of our talks ever since). TV programmes, films and even, in some cases, theatre shows can now be streamed on-line and, of course, many people now work from home, some even running their businesses from home.

The result is a fall in demand for retail, leisure and business spaces in the city centre – and the result is empty buildings slowly falling into dilapidation, if not yet quite dereliction.

### **3. Our Vision for Wakefield and the Wakefield City Centre Masterplan**

In January 2021, the Society published its own ‘Vision for Wakefield’ (see: <https://wakefieldcivicsociety.org.uk/our-vision-for-wakefield/>). In that document, we called for a city centre that would

- offer cultural and leisure activities that would appeal to local residents and people from further afield;
- attract tourism and visitors;
- promote liveability and connectedness; and
- show an increase in the number of city centre and inner-city residents.

We contributed ideas to the Council’s emerging City Centre Masterplan and were pleased to support the published Masterplan when it was adopted by the Council in January 2022. Our President had meanwhile accepted a place on the Wakefield High Street Taskforce established by the Council to oversee expenditure of a number of grants from central government for projects within the city centre.

### **4. The Proposals for ‘Cathedral Quarter’**

Although the Society has been closely involved in earlier discussions with the Council and other stakeholders about the future of the city centre, we only learned of the proposals for the new ‘Cathedral Quarter’ when the decision to purchase The Ridings had been publicly announced. We understand that there may have been a need for discussions to have been concluded prior to the announcement because of the potential commercial sensitivities and suspect that a decision needed to be reached fairly swiftly

to take advantage of the funding offer from central government. In publishing this response, therefore, we are only able to comment on the relatively high-level information that has so far been made available.

That being said, the Society's Executive Committee met on the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> February to discuss the proposals and, while we have many questions, we felt that we could offer 'cautious support' for the principle underlying the project.

It has been clear from social media comments for some time, and from what we hear from some of our own members, that many people are dissatisfied with the state of things in the city centre as they are at present. Many comments regret the decline of the city centre as a place for retail and leisure but it is obvious that we cannot just simply try to recreate the past.

Some blame the Council for the decline in recent years – but, very often, the problems are not caused by the Council; they are the result of decisions made by private owners who find it difficult to find tenants for their properties and businesses moving to new models of operation. Marks and Spencer's recent announcement that they are moving out of the city centre to City Fields is a commercial decision and is not unexpected – they have been looking for suitable out-of-town sites for many years. (They tried to open a food store in Sandal back in 2016 but permission was refused, confirmed on appeal in 2018). So it was only a matter of time before they moved and it is noticeable that they are only proposing to open a food store, not a full food, clothing and household store. With the loss first of BHS and then M&S, The Ridings (and the city centre) has lost two key anchor stores while others have, of course, decamped to Trinity Walk. Even Trinity Walk has suffered with the loss of Debenhams – a loss that has been part of a national collapse rather than being just a local issue but one reflective of the changes that are happening everywhere.

According to the current owner of The Ridings, the shopping centre is proving too expensive to operate and maintain and we need to accept that, at least in places such as Wakefield, the day of the large shopping mall is now over. The Council did look to buy The Ridings just a few years ago but decided against doing so at the time. It is the offer of central government funding that now appears to make the purchase viable but as part of a much wider project.

We also understand that the existing residential tower blocks need major investment to prolong their lives – the ones above the Ridings were built around 60 years ago and their construction today wouldn't be possible, or even desirable, under modern safety and building standards. Meanwhile, we have seen vacant spaces above and within existing empty retail and office space being converted into residential accommodation. Some of these are self-contained flats, others are HMOs (Houses of Multiple Occupation).

While some of these conversions work and have helped to bring residents back into the city, many of the conversions are compromises, providing accommodation that is perhaps less than ideal.

The various projects already underway in the city centre, such as the Kirkgate Innovative Neighbourhood Gateway, which will see new homes being built in lower Kirkgate, and the new Vico homes being built alongside the Kirkgate roundabout, will certainly have a positive impact on the city centre but are probably not sufficient in themselves to transform the fortunes of the city. Something on a bigger, and arguably bolder, scale is needed. The proposals for the Cathedral Quarter could well be just what the city needs to halt the steady decline and transform Wakefield once again into a vibrant and attractive city. Nothing on this scale has been attempted in Wakefield since the regeneration projects of the 1950s and 60s – and, of course, the coming of The Ridings in 1983.

## **5. Our Concerns**

For the record, we are in favour of the Council acquiring The Ridings – only the Council can undertake such a wide-reaching redevelopment which necessitates the acquisition of land and properties in multiple ownerships while also managing the different stakeholder interests and securing the required funding.

Our concerns, which we set out below, are based on the information currently available. We reserve the right to modify or add to these as more information is published. We shall certainly look to raise these concerns once the consultation gets underway – and that consultation must be meaningful and inclusive if the project is to garner the support of residents and businesses.

We appreciate the uncertainty that the Council's announcement will have caused for everyone directly affected by the changes. The project will undoubtedly cause disruption for an extended period and the Council will need to do what it can to minimise the impact while also doing all that it can to ensure businesses can continue to operate. We do not want to see businesses leaving the city – The Ridings is home to a number of national and brands and independent traders and we hope that they can be successfully relocated to new premises within the Cathedral Quarter or elsewhere within the city centre.

Additionally, many people will have fond memories of The Ridings and it is important that the history of The Ridings is celebrated even if the buildings themselves are lost. We should not lose sight of the fact that, when first built, The Ridings was much admired for its innovation and design.

*Our concerns:*

- a) The City Centre Masterplan – although redevelopment of The Ridings is envisioned in the current Masterplan, the new proposals are more ambitious and extensive than suggested. An urgent updating of the Masterplan should be undertaken to take account of the new proposals and should make clear how the new Cathedral Quarter will relate to the other city centre projects already underway. A design scheme for the city centre should take account of the contiguity of the various projects.
- b) Given the very central location, the redesign should maximise opportunities for pedestrian movement throughout the city centre.
- c) The Cathedral precinct features a large public art installation by Tess Jaray completed in 1992. We will seek assurances that this significant artwork will be retained.
- d) Additionally, we would like to see the use of public art within the public realm, either commissioned standalone installations or themed to tell stories of Wakefield and its people over time. During the demolition and construction phases, artwork could be used to screen building work.
- e) Historic vistas and long-range views of the cathedral through the new development should also be ensured.
- f) The artist's impressions of the new Cathedral Quarter indicate the all the buildings between Boots and Southgate will be demolished. Boots dates from the interwar Art Deco period, as do its neighbours up to and including the former BHS store. These are arguably of better architectural merit than those lower down the precinct, i.e., below Almshouse Lane, and we would prefer to see a solution that enables these buildings in the upper part of the precinct to survive, even if their façades have to be re-located and incorporated elsewhere within the development. (We acknowledge that the interior period features of these properties have, sadly, largely been lost over the years.) The buildings are distinctive and represent an architectural period where examples in the city centre are already in very short supply.
- g) Mindful of today's environmental concerns, the ideal solution with old buildings is to re-use and repurpose wherever possible to safeguard the embodied carbon. While we accept that The Ridings is not an easy building to adapt, even if a new purpose could be found, we

wonder if any part of the building might be retained and incorporated into the new scheme? Failing that, could design elements from The Ridings be incorporated into the buildings which take its place? The Society was influential in securing some of the design features of the existing Ridings car park, stressing a strong preference for brick and slate finishes on the George Street/Southgate/Almshouse Lane elevations particularly, and for the added ‘turrets’ atop the lift housings and stair wells.

- h) As set out in the current City Centre Masterplan, the new blocks should encourage diversity of design and use with a mix of tenures and accommodation types. While there will be a need for mixed residential, retail and office spaces, we also want to see opportunities for hospitality and leisure venues, including active leisure activities.
- i) We would like to see more detail on the proposed uses and design of the green space to be created alongside the precinct. Our desire to see the store fronts facing onto the precinct at this point would indicate that the open space may need to be located elsewhere within the overall scheme.
- j) The funding secured from central government is welcomed but additional funding will be required to complete the project over the 10-15 year timeline envisaged. We would like to see more information on where that additional funding will come from to prevent work starting and then standing uncompleted. Lessons need to be learned from other cities such as Bradford where large scale clearance and redevelopment projects commenced but then stalled for lengthy periods. Demolition and construction work should be undertaken in phases and funding secured for each phase before work starts to minimise the amount of unoccupied land at any one time. The project will also generate additional workload for the Council’s planning staff and this needs to be reflected within the project plans and budgets.
- k) Phasing and sequencing of the work will be necessary to allow for the resettlement of existing residents whose homes are now facing demolition and for the decanting of businesses from The Ridings into new premises within the city centre. A project plan showing the different stages should be developed as a matter of urgency to provide some assurances for residents and businesses and to allow those affected to plan their lives.
- l) Finally, the Society has two blue plaques on properties within the scheme – one on the front of Boots, commemorating the location of Manor House Yard and the Moot Hall, and one on Greenwood House,

commemorating the life of Arthur Greenwood (1880-1954), a former MP for Wakefield. We will look to see that these plaques are not lost within the overall scheme of things.

Wakefield Civic Society

9<sup>th</sup> February 2026