

LEEDS – ARE WE GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

Leeds has enjoyed major economic success in recent years, becoming the fastest growing city in England and number one financial centre after London. Its universities attract thousands of students and retail is booming. All this is reflected in the changing face of the city centre. But is the price of success now too high? The well loved Corn Exchange shops are all but gone; Kirkgate Market traders await an uncertain fate; skyscrapers and over-priced flats are set to dominate the skyline with little consultation while affordable council housing is demolished.

SUMMARY ANALYSIS
of the public event to
discuss the future of
Leeds City Centre

Held on 28th February 2008 6-9pm
@ Rupert Beckett Lecture Theatre.
Michael Sadler Building, University of Leeds.

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In collaboration with other members of the School of Geography, University of Leeds,
and the Faculty of Arts and Society, Leeds Metropolitan University

INTRODUCTION

This report presents a summary of the results of a public event organised by academics from the University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University about the future of Leeds City Centre on the 28th February 2008.

The event was organised as a response to recent events in the City Centre that made some of us think more democratic discussion and debate was needed about the direction Leeds is taking. At the end of 2007, it was announced that independent traders from the Corn Exchange would be replaced by upmarket restaurants and food chains, while next door, traders at the Kirkgate Market were being confronted with another redevelopment proposal. In the last years we have seen an unprecedented development of city centre flats aimed at young professionals and investors, and yet more plans for upmarket retail outlets. As researchers in cities and regeneration with national and international expertise, we wonder to whom is all this development addressed and whether it is inclusive and sustainable.

In the spirit of dialogue we sent an open letter to the Leader of Leeds City Council explaining our concerns. This was published in the Yorkshire Evening Post on the 18th December 2007 (see Appendices). In the letter we invited members of the public to come to the University of Leeds on 28th February 2008 for a public meeting on these issues. The publication of the letter coincided with a series of articles under the title of "Leeds at the crossroads" published by the Yorkshire Evening Post from in December 2007 and also with a meeting organised by Leeds City Council on City Centre development at the end of January 2008, which was mainly directed at the private sector.

Our meeting at the University was extremely well received and widely publicised with features appearing in the Yorkshire Evening Post and on BBC Radio Leeds. Over 200 people attended the discussion. The audience was diverse, including local residents, students, university staff, council employees, and representatives of many local groups. A range of ages was evident on the evening, with large numbers of representatives of older people (from

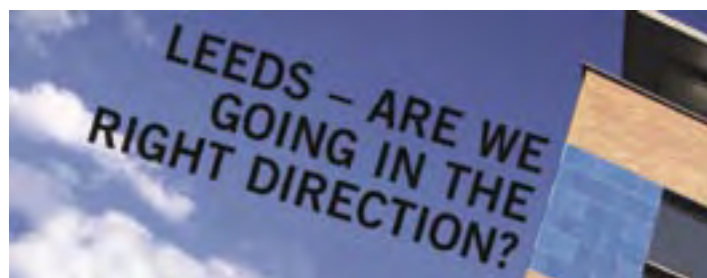
pensioner and tenants' groups) and young people (from the universities) in attendance. Clearly, there are limits to the representativeness of any largely self-selecting group of people. Nevertheless, the large turnout was testament to the appetite for debate in our city.

The event was chaired by Andrew Edwards from BBC Radio Leeds with deliberations structured into four sessions, all focusing on eliciting the views of the audience (see Appendices for programme). The first two sessions asked the audience what they thought were the positive and negative aspects of Leeds City Centre. These were written on large white boards at the front of the lecture theatre. The third part of the evening asked the audience to list proposals which would improve the City Centre. The final part asked the audience to list three questions they would like to ask about the City Centre.

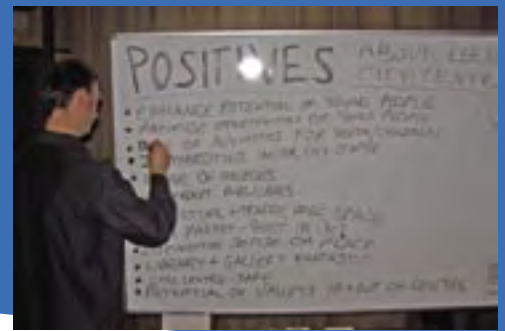
We have structured the analysis in the same way. The following pages highlight the key findings of the results in each of the four areas (negatives, positives, proposals and questions) and include a summary analysis of results. The sub-categories do not always match given that the types of responses varied during different parts of the evening. However, we have tried to be as consistent as possible. All the raw data appears in the Appendices to the report, and can be used to find more detail on actual responses.

This report and the appendices are freely available at our website:

<http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/groups/leedsdirection/>



1. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF LEEDS CITY CENTRE

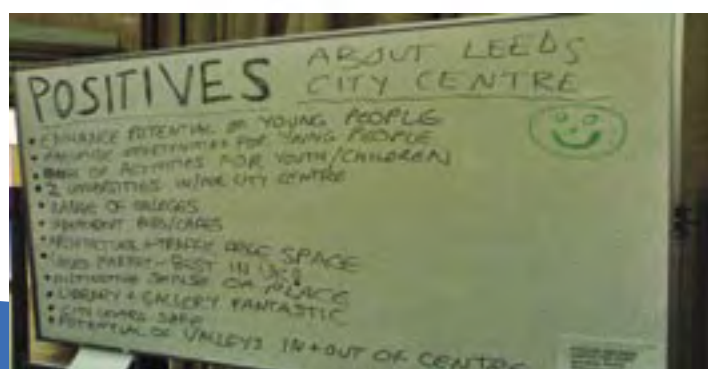
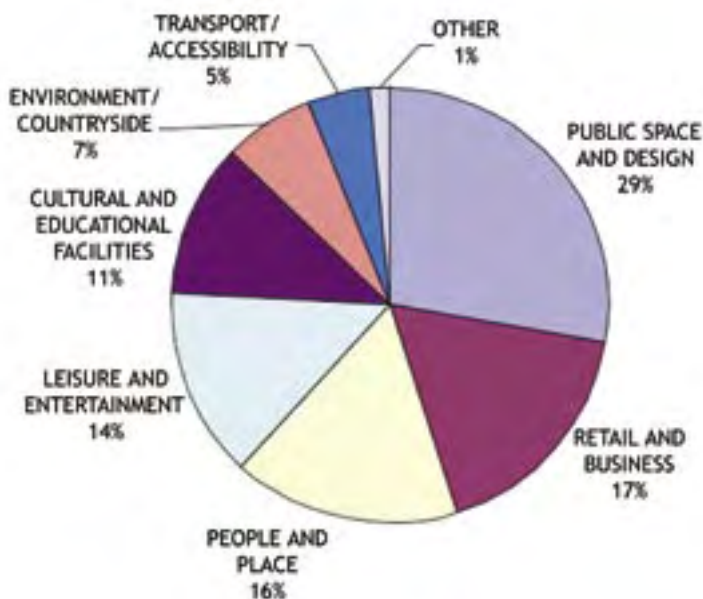


The evening debate began with the over 200 participants being asked about the positive aspects of Leeds City Centre. Participants mentioned 468 positive areas that we have sorted into nine categories.

- ▶ Public Space and Design
- ▶ Retail and Business
- ▶ People and Place
- ▶ Leisure and Entertainment
- ▶ Cultural and Educational facilities
- ▶ Environment/Countryside
- ▶ Transport/Accessibility
- ▶ Planning and Development
- ▶ Health Facilities

The largest number of positive aspects identified fell into the category **Public Space and Design** which accounted for more than a quarter of the responses. This category was followed by **Retail and Business** and **People and Place** which both accounted for about 17% of the positives. Then came **Leisure and Entertainment** (14%) and **Cultural and Educational facilities** (11%). The chart below shows in detail the distribution of the answers.

Figure 1. Positive aspects of Leeds City Centre: by category



Looking in more detail, **Public Space and Design** were seen as the most positive aspects of Leeds City Centre. Of the 130 statements, there was clear support for the preservation of old historical buildings (31 responses) and particular buildings or "quarters" such as Victoria Quarter, the Tiled Hall, the Market and the Corn Exchange (29). Other answers (12) highlighted the mix of old and new architecture in the City Centre, and its spatial compactness (29 responses).

The second highest number of positives concerned **Retail and Business**. Of the 81 responses, the diversity and range of shopping and retail facilities accounted for 23%, but interestingly the most positive aspect for participants was Kirkgate Market with 45% of responses. Brands and chains only yielded four positives.

Issues relating to **People and Place** produced 77 responses. Here the friendliness of the people and the welcoming environment of a busy and vibrant city were the most positive features (31 responses), followed by the cultural and ethnic diversity as well as youth of the population.

Combining the City Centre's **Leisure and Entertainment** offer with its **Cultural and Educational** venues, the most popular features were: independent leisure venues (23), the range and variety of activities, cultural facilities such as art galleries or the theatres (33) and the Universities or other educational facilities (20). Interestingly, looking across categories we notice that Millennium Square is mentioned as a positive feature of the city not just in terms of its public space and architectural design but also as a location for a diverse range of activities to take place.

Table 1 lists the ten most popular themes from the nine categories listed above. Kirkgate Market comes out as the most positive aspect of Leeds City Centre. Other important positive features of Leeds are the cultural facilities and offer such as art galleries, theatres or the Central Library. The friendly and welcoming nature of the city and its inhabitants was considered the third most popular element followed by the architectural and historical quality of the urban landscape.

Table 1. Ten most positive aspects of Leeds City Centre

Aspect	No. out of 468 proposals
Kirkgate Market	37
Cultural facilities and offer	33
Friendly/welcoming/safe	31
Preservation of old historical buildings	31
Particular buildings/areas/projects	29
Compact city centre	27
Independent leisure venues/facilities/activities	23
Universities and education	20
Compact and varied city centre shopping	19
Architecture and urban landscape in general	18

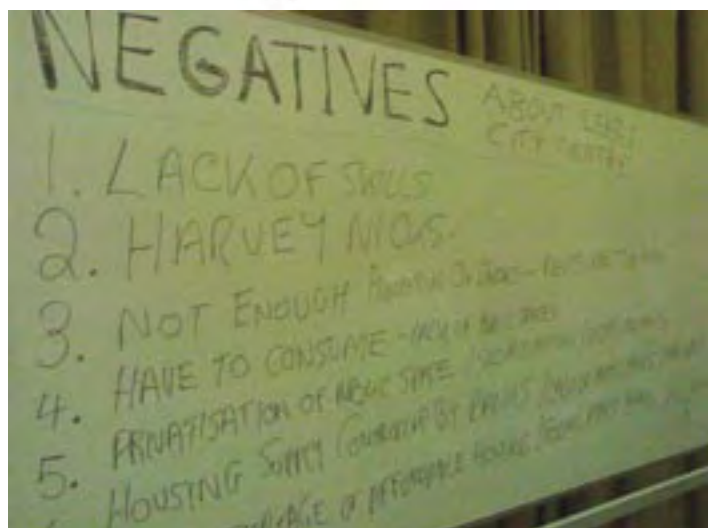
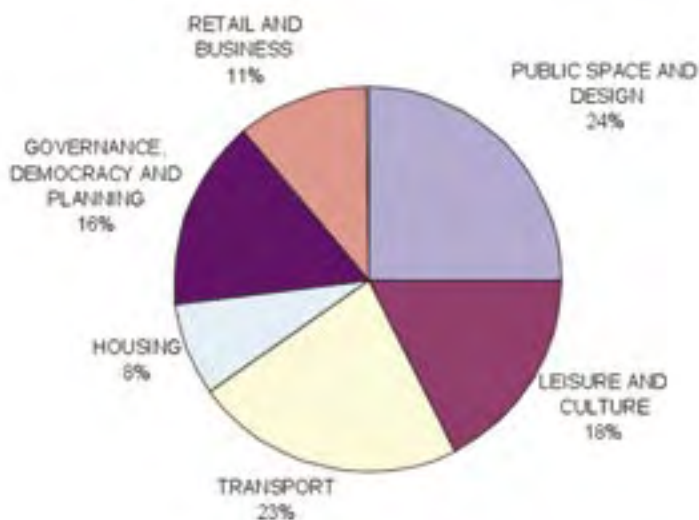
2. NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF LEEDS CITY CENTRE

The second part of our evening event focused on the negative aspects of the City Centre. 445 negative comments were recorded and we have grouped these into seven categories as follows:

- ▶ Transport
- ▶ Public Space and Design
- ▶ Environment
- ▶ Governance, Democracy and Planning
- ▶ Leisure and Culture
- ▶ Retail And Business
- ▶ Housing

Nearly half of all responses related to **Public Space and Design** (24.9%) and **Transport** (22.9%), followed by **Leisure and Culture** (17.5%), **Governance, Planning and Democracy** (15.7%), **Retail and Business** (11.2%), and **Housing** (7.5%).

Figure 2. Negative aspects of Leeds City Centre: by category



A breakdown of these categories reveals some clear findings about what people do not like about Leeds. Within the **Public Space and Design** category, 30% of responses criticised the poor architecture of new buildings, particularly the high rise flats and offices; 21.6% of responses did not think the city had utilised its waterfront; 15% complained about the lack of free, non-commercial public space, with the same number mentioning the poor quality of the public realm.

Within **Transport**, 37% of responses lamented the poor infrastructure and connectivity, while 27% criticised the poor public transport and 26% did not approve of the congestion caused by cars, and nearly 16% of responses focused on the poor cycling and pedestrian provision.

The city's **Leisure and Cultural** offer was criticised for the dominance of bars and drinking culture (38%), the lack of facilities (36%) with particular reference to a concert arena, and the lack of cultural diversity (15%).

In the **Governance, Planning and Democracy** category, 30% of responses related to criticisms of Leeds City Council's role, with particular anger at the lack of consultation and transparency of decisions and weak leadership, criticisms of the city's imbalanced development (27%), the lack of facilities for city centre residents (21%) and the corporate control of the city's direction (14%).

While respondents made proportionally less negative comments about the city's **Retail and business** offer, there was strong criticism of the lack of independent shops (34%), the sense of 'clone town Britain' taking over with the dominance of corporate brands and chains (34%), and 22% concerned about the future of Kirkgate Market (12%) and the Corn Exchange (10%).

Finally, **Housing** received the smallest number of negative responses, which can be mainly explained by our decision to categorise criticisms of the city centre apartments within other sections. Of responses, some 65% criticised the lack of social/affordable housing.

Table 2 lists the most negative ten subcategories from the categories listed above. What is evident is a clear preponderance on issues relating to transport and congestion, as well as the nature of development and the types of uses of the City Centre.

Table 2. Ten most negative aspects of Leeds City Centre

Aspect	No. out of 445 proposals
Poor transport infrastructure and connectivity	38
Poor architecture of new buildings	34
Nightlife dominated by drinking culture	30
Lack of cultural and leisure facilities	28
Poor public transport	28
Congestion and cars	27
Underutilised waterfront	24
Lack of social housing / affordable	22
Criticism of Leeds City Council	21
Imbalanced development	19

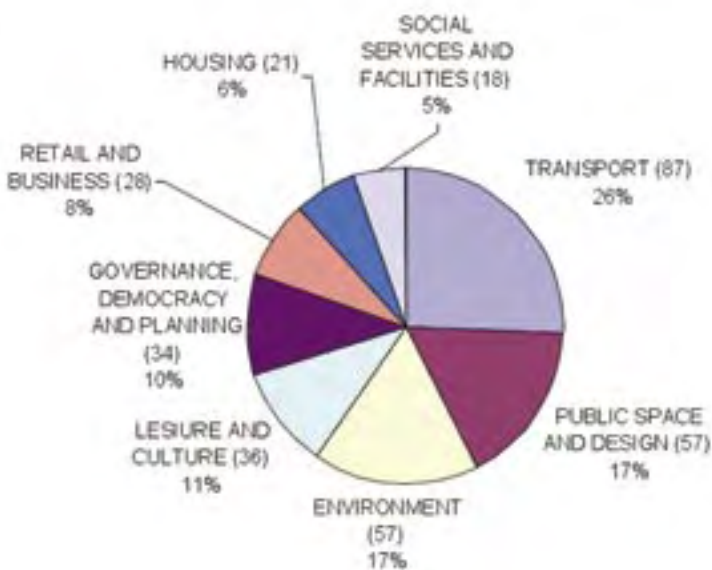
3. PROPOSALS WHICH COULD IMPROVE LEEDS CITY CENTRE

Having identified their positive and negative impressions of Leeds City Centre, participants were then given a third task on the night - to come up with some proposals to build on the successes and tackle the city's weakpoints. This produced 338 proposals, which we have grouped into eight categories as follows:

- ▶ Transport
- ▶ Public Space and Design
- ▶ Environment
- ▶ Governance, Democracy and Planning
- ▶ Leisure and Culture
- ▶ Retail and Business
- ▶ Housing
- ▶ Social Services and Facilities

The largest three categories of proposals were **Transport**, accounting for over a quarter of all the proposals made, and **Public Space and Design** and **Environment**, which both accounted for about one-sixth of proposals made. A third of proposals were accounted for by **Leisure and Culture** (11%), **Governance, Democracy and Planning** (10%), and **Retail and Business** (8%) between them, followed by **Housing** (6%) and **Social Services and Facilities** (5%).

Figure 3. Proposals to improve Leeds City Centre by category



Looking in more detail, the 87 proposals for improving **Transport** were dominated by four issues: the overwhelming desire to improve buses and public transport (24 proposals); more traffic-free and pedestrian-friendly areas (16); improving cycling facilities (13); and a rapid transit system (10).

In terms of **Public Space and Design**, nearly half of the 57 proposals were for more or better quality public space (26). Other proposals included more respect and diversity (8) and more family and child-friendly facilities (6).

The third main area, that of the **Environment** generated 57 proposals and again there was a clear consensus on the need for more green space and more trees, which accounted for 82% of proposals.

Other interesting proposals included: increase public participation in shaping the city (12 proposals within the Governance theme); a concert venue/arena (14 proposals within the Leisure and Culture theme); and more support for independent outlets and businesses (19 proposals within the Retail and Business theme). The 21 proposals on housing were mainly focused on the need to improve and expand the amount of affordable and social rented housing (16 proposals).

The table below lists the top ten proposals made on the night. There was a clear preference for very achievable projects which reinforce established Council priorities. These include: improving green space, public transport, public space, support for small and local businesses and reducing traffic and ensuring affordable housing. These preferences establish a further and clear public mandate for more concerted action to realise these ideas.

Table 3. Top ten proposals to improve Leeds City Centre

Aspect	No. out of 338 proposals
Green space and trees	47
More/better quality public space	26
Improve buses/public transport	24
Support independent outlets/businesses	19
Traffic free and pedestrian friendly centre	16
Improve/expand affordable/social housing	16
Concert venue/arena	14
Improve cycling facilities	13
Increase participation	12
More city centre services (education, health)	12

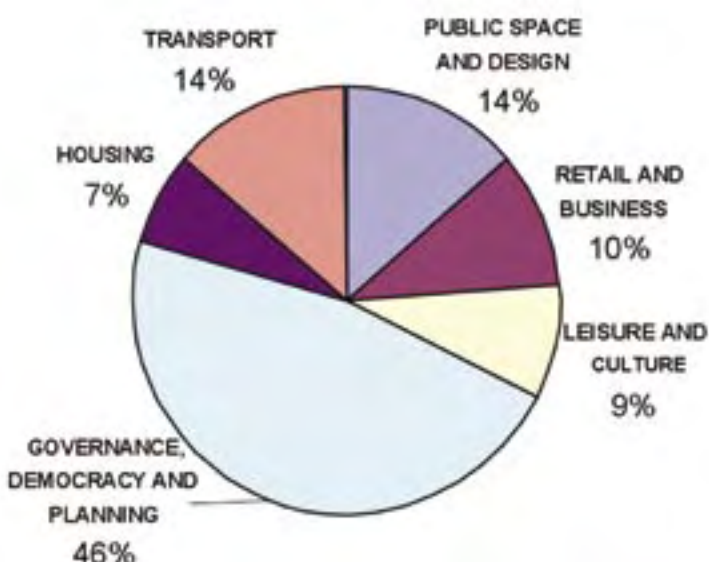
4. QUESTIONS THE AUDIENCE WANTED ANSWERING ABOUT LEEDS CITY CENTRE

Towards the end of the event we asked participants to write down up to three questions they had always wanted answering about Leeds City Centre. The purpose of this exercise was to gain a better understanding of what people want to know about Leeds to help the City Council respond to civic participation, and enable academic researchers to orient our research so that it connects with people's interests and concerns. Participants put forward 117 questions, which we have categorised as follows:

- ▶ Public Space and Design
- ▶ Retail and Business
- ▶ Leisure and Culture
- ▶ Governance, Democracy and Planning
- ▶ Housing
- ▶ Transport

The smaller number of categories than for "positives", "negatives" and "proposals" reflects the much lower net total of responses. The most popular type of question by far concerned **Governance, Democracy and Planning**, accounting for 47% of all the questions put forward. **Transport** and **Public Space and Design** were also popular, each accounting for about 14% of the total. The following graph shows how all the categories were distributed.

Figure 4. Questions about Leeds City Centre: by category



Of the 55 questions asked about **Governance, Democracy and Planning**, 16 questions related to both the nature of development of the City Centre (in particular in relation to the height and scale of residential developments and their poor design) and the lack of consultation and citizens' power in influencing decision making in Leeds. 14 questions concerned the governance of the city and the functioning of the Leeds City Council itself, with many people wondering how decisions were made or where resources went.

Within the **Transport** category, seven questions addressed the issue of Supertram and six the sustainability of the transport system in Leeds (usage of cars versus bicycles, for example).

On **Public Space and Design**, questions were fairly evenly allocated to issues of lack of green space, the dominance of corporate culture, the lack of independent shops, Kirkgate Market, and the lack of leisure facilities.

The table below gives a flavour of the types of questions posed during the evening.

Table 4. Selection of questions which the audience wanted answering about Leeds City Centre

Selection of Questions

1. Why has the Council failed to develop Millennium Square as a convivial, intercultural, non-commercial public space?
2. Why does it seem like LCC wants to clutter pavements and public space with walls etc. limiting line of sight and reducing sense of personal security when dark
3. Why such a lack of public art in the city centre?
4. Who let them build 3 McDonalds & 7 Subways? We need cafés with individuality
5. Why are Corn Exchange and Kirkgate Market being scrapped in favour of clone town syndrome?
6. Where are the FREE spaces to hang out?
7. Why no main recreational facility e.g. a swimming pool
8. Why do consultations go ahead & proposals do not change even if the consultees offer suggestions?
9. How can we reignite local democracy & the chance to participate & discuss Leeds future?
10. Who actually makes the decisions?
11. Why isn't Leeds run for all its people, not just commercial interests?
12. How can those of all income groups use the city centre?
13. Why did the council give permission for so many privately built excess blocks of student accommodation?
14. Is there justification for corporate tall buildings (offices and residential) in Leeds?
15. Why have we ended up with so many small unit flats in the city centre?
16. Are agencies fragmented, or do they work well together?
17. What is the city council doing to generate energy on its own city centre buildings?
18. Why is there no affordable housing projects built in the city centre (social housing)?
19. Why is the car valued over the pedestrian?
20. Why when the supertram was rejected was the money not put into guided busses on the same routes?

5. CONCLUSIONS

On 28th February 2008, over 200 people attended an open public meeting at the University of Leeds to debate the current and future direction of Leeds City Centre. Some clear conclusions come out of the evening debate. In summary:

▶ **positive aspects** related to the city's great layout, spaces and buildings (and in particular Kirkgate market), its people, its universities and its independent outlets;

▶ **negative aspects** related to transport and congestion, the poor quality of new architecture and in particular tall buildings, lack of cultural facilities, drinking cultures, lack of social housing, the lack of participation and Leeds City Council's governance style;

▶ **proposals** showed a clear mandate for more green space and trees, more public space, improved public transport, support for independent outlets, more traffic free areas and more social housing;

▶ **questions** predominantly related to why Leeds had an imbalance between commercial and independent business, the reasons behind poor quality architecture and public spaces, and the lack of a culture of citizen participation and consultation.

A key finding is that many aspects of the City Centre were seen by participants in both positive and negative light. For example, features of the city's public space and design were simultaneously cited as the best and worst of Leeds City Centre. While this may seem contradictory, it indicates to us that the public really value existing 'good' public space and design, but at the same time really dislike areas where it is under threat or being undermined by neglect or poor quality new additions. The participants stressed the many great assets of the compact and architecturally beautiful City Centre and appreciated efforts to maintain and promote these. However, the overriding feeling of those present was that this unique strength was being seriously undermined by previous and current waves of market-led, corporate-dominated and poorly-designed architecture and the lack of new and green public spaces. In a similar way, Kirkgate market was seen a major positive aspect, but its uncertain future also emerged as a major negative aspect.

Additionally, transport and congestion were seen to be undermining efforts to maintain an accessible and pleasant City Centre, and that efforts needed to focus on access and connectivity, especially through the use of green routes. A further recurring theme related to the greening of the central area, especially through more trees, pocket parks, and major public and open spaces. In light of the recent severe downturn in the property market and postponement of major construction projects (Lumière, Greenbank, Criterion, Spiracle etc), we believe that there are significant opportunities emerging to engage in dialogue with developers about additional green space on sites previously designated for ambitious buildings.

Encouragingly, many of the proposals that came out of our evening debate resonate closely with those emerging from the City Council's own 'City Centre Conference' in January 2008 and reinforce the direction of travel of Council policy. They add up to a 'common sense' agenda for change built on a solid consensus. The key themes within this agenda are:

- ▶ **More green space/trees and more/better quality public space**
- ▶ **Improved public transport and traffic free spaces**
- ▶ **Increased support for independent businesses and venues**
- ▶ **Improved and expanded affordable housing**
- ▶ **Increased citizen participation**

The challenge at hand is to ask why more progress is not being made in these areas and what the existing barriers are to putting them into practice. A major complaint from the 200-plus participants on the night was the perceived top-down, undemocratic and unresponsive style of governance of the City Centre by the Council, and the lack of a genuine consultation approach that values the views and ideas of the city's diverse residents. We look forward to working with the City Council to help it to realise the emerging agenda for the City Centre and to find ways to implement the key areas and concerns as noted above which emerged from our evening debate.

