Vision for Thirsk

Part of the Town Investment Plans programme

Draft Plan



Town Investment Plans

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNCIL

YORK & NORTH YORKSHIRE COMBINED AUTHORITY | DAVID SKAITH MAYOR

Message from the Leader of North Yorkshire Council

Our towns are at the heart of our communities; each has its own unique qualities and character. Through the Town Investment Plan programme, we aim to celebrate what each town has to offer, whilst also identifying its specific challenges and opportunities.

This programme covers 32 towns across North Yorkshire. We have been working collaboratively with residents, community groups, partners and businesses to understand what matters to local people and together create a vision for each town's future.

This plan reflects Thirsk's character, strengths, opportunities and priorities. It has been shaped by feedback from the local community.
It sets out a clear plan to help guide future activity and investment.

Our focus is not only on planning for the future, but on supporting delivery through strong partnerships and community-driven involvement.

I would like to thank everyone who has given their time, insight and expertise to the development of this plan.



Cllr Carl Les
Leader of North Yorkshire Council



Message from the Mayor of York and North Yorkshire

Our towns, villages, and high streets are where our communities come together, and every single place has its own unique story to tell. It's people who live and work in those places that know them the best. That's why we funded the Town Investment Plans, to put the power directly into the hands of the people who call these places home.

Working with our local authority partners, we're supporting more than 30 communities to develop bespoke plans. These strategies will identify local priorities, unlock future investment, and establish a proud, clear vision for the decade ahead.

Having run my own high street shop, I know how vital a thriving town centre is to local pride, economic opportunity, and community life. That is why it is essential that these plans are built from the ground up with our communities.

I want to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who has shared their ideas and experiences so far. Together, we can build a stronger, more resilient future in every place across our county.



David Skaith
Mayor of York and North Yorkshire



Introduction

North Yorkshire Town Investment Plans Programme

The North Yorkshire Town Investment Plans Programme (TIP programme) provides a consistent approach to preparing Investment Plans for 32 towns across the county. Funded by the Mayor of York and North Yorkshire, the programme responds to the North Yorkshire Council Economic Growth Strategy 2024–2029 and supports the Mayoral ambition of 'a great plan for every town'.

The Investment Plan will identify local issues and opportunities and establish a shared vision supported by realistic and deliverable activity. Each plan will be proportionate to the settlement's size, role and investment need whilst remaining flexible to evolve as new evidence, projects and funding opportunities emerge.

Once complete, Investment Plans will be used to guide future investment that contributes towards the region's growth priorities. North Yorkshire Council has agreed to focus resources based on need, opportunity and scale. Although Investment Plans do not guarantee funding or establish spatial allocations, they will be used to feed into a wider investment pipeline.

Many projects are likely to need further development, and all will need to demonstrate good public value and strategic alignment. Smaller projects will remain important locally and help inform future programme delivery whilst Investment Plans provide the strategic evidence for communities working across North Yorkshire in supporting their business cases or funding bid development.

Thirsk serves a sizeable rural hinterland, with approximately 12,566 people living within a 3km radius of the town centre. The Plan identifies six objectives for Thirsk and a pipeline of prioritised projects. These range from public realm and Market Place improvements to active travel, station access, community-led environmental projects and wellbeing initiatives.

Introduction to Thirsk

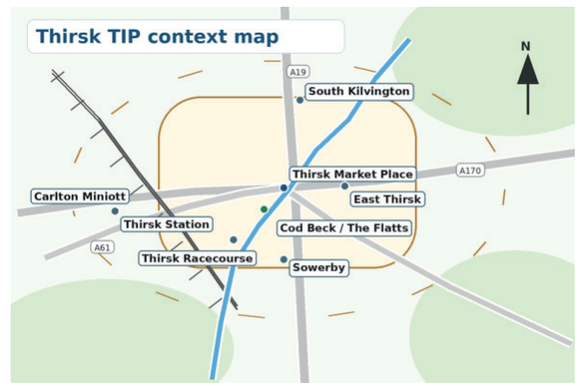
Thirsk is a distinctive and vibrant market town with a rich heritage, strong community spirit and an attractive historic centre focused around its iconic cobbled Market Place and clock tower. Nestled between the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors, the town enjoys an enviable location within the North Yorkshire countryside, offering residents and visitors easy access to some of the county's most celebrated landscapes. While not located within a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Thirsk sits close to the Howardian Hills and Nidderdale National Landscapes and benefits from its own attractive natural assets, including Cod Beck, The Flatts and the surrounding rural environment, which contribute significantly to local wellbeing, identity and environmental quality.

Serving as an important service centre for local residents and neighbouring Sowerby, Carlton Miniott, South Kilvington and a wider rural hinterland, the town benefits from strong road and rail connections, with the A1(M) and A19 nearby and direct rail services linking Thirsk to major destinations across the region and beyond. These connections support both residents and businesses, helping to sustain a thriving local economy.

Thirsk is renowned for its racecourse, livestock market, and long-standing market tradition, as well as its association with the celebrated veterinary author James Alfred Wight, better known as James Herriot. A wealth of historic buildings, conservation areas and cultural assets combined with independent shops, cafés, restaurants, and regular market activity create a distinctive and welcoming town centre that attracts visitors throughout the year. Public parking within the Market Place further enhances accessibility and vitality.

The town benefits from a diverse range of amenities, leisure facilities, green spaces, employers, and a strong visitor economy built upon its heritage, cultural offer, and surrounding countryside. Thirsk also boasts an active voluntary and community sector, reflecting the strong civic pride and community engagement that characterise the area.

Thirsk's many strengths are reflected in a range of positive social, economic, and environmental indicators. Compared with both North Yorkshire and England averages, residents generally enjoy longer life expectancy and lower levels of premature mortality (under 75s). The town also supports a strong business base with high levels of enterprise activity and a lower personal carbon footprint. Together, these assets position Thirsk as an attractive, well-connected, and prosperous market town with a strong sense of place and a promising future.



Alongside its thriving visitor economy, the town has a strong retail sector centred around the Market Place, hosting a range of independent traders and regular artisan markets. The rural business community is further served by a livestock auction market and business centre on the outskirts of the town. There is also a significant industrial presence, with nearby sites including Thirsk Industrial Park, Martree Business Park and Dalton Industrial Estate, attracting and retaining key businesses.

Strategic Alignment

The Thirsk Town Investment Plan has been shaped by a range of national, regional, and local strategies.

National

In national policy terms there is a wider recognition of the importance of local places and an appreciation of the changing role of town centres as important service centres, local economic drivers and community hubs. National policy supports sustainable growth, town-centre vitality, climate resilience, active travel, inclusive economic opportunity, heritage-led regeneration, nature recovery and health and wellbeing. Together, these priorities support a place-based, evidence-led and delivery-focused Town Investment Plan.

Public health is increasingly seen as an important consideration in designing and adapting public places and spaces, and environmental issues are taking a higher profile in local and national policy positions.

For Thirsk, this includes higher rates of adult obesity and mental health conditions than the North Yorkshire and England averages. Lower rates of pupils progressing to higher education than both the England and North Yorkshire average, lower income levels and lower gross value added (GVA) per head than the England and North Yorkshire average.

The Plan supports the broad principles of sustainable development set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. It reflects the importance of healthy communities, thriving high streets, good-quality public spaces, active travel, heritage, culture, and environmental improvement.

As a principal service centre and traditional market town, Thirsk's historic Market Place is a community hub and plays a key role in the employment and visitor economy for Thirsk and the surrounding villages. The vitality of Thirsk's town centre, local community and services, is directly impacted by planning policies and decisions. For Thirsk this includes optimising the Market Place to support the economic, social, and environmental potential of Thirsk and the surrounding areas.

Regional

At a regional level, the Plan fits with the ambitions of the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority and the York and North Yorkshire Economic Framework. It supports inclusive growth, better health, reduced carbon emissions, and improved access to opportunity. It also reinforces Thirsk's role as a key service, employment, and visitor centre for a wider rural area.

The Plan also helps deliver several North Yorkshire Council priorities, including economic growth, health and wellbeing, climate action, culture, visitor economy, and sustainable transport. Many of the proposed projects support more than one of these priorities, which is important in making the best use of future investment.

Local

As part of the development of this Plan, we have reviewed local studies and reports, and the Plan draws on existing strategies and plans rather than starting from scratch.

The Plan builds on the previous 2022 Thirsk Town Investment Plan, which formed part of a project led by Hambleton District Council to produce five bespoke town investment plans for the market towns within the former district area.

The 2022 Town Investment Plan did not progress to the public consultation stage. Consequently, extensive public engagement and consultation were identified as key priorities in the development of the 2026 Thirsk Town Investment Plan, ensuring that the Plan was shaped by the views, aspirations, and priorities of the local community.

The detailed findings and recommendations set out in the 2022 Town Investment Plan have helped to inform and shape this updated Plan. Many of the opportunities identified remain relevant to Thirsk today, as evidenced by the findings from the recent public engagement and consultation activities.

In addition, a series of other NYC Strategies and evidence base documents have been considered in the development of the Thirsk Town Investment Plan, including the Climate Change Strategy 2023 - 2030, Cultural Strategy (November 2024), Destination Management Plan 2024 – 2034, Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2023 – 2030, Bus Service Improvement Plan (2024 Update), Housing and Economic Development Needs Assessment (May 2025) and the Local Transport Plan.

Evidence: Thirsk's Strengths, Issues and Opportunities

The following strengths, challenges and opportunities have been identified from the evidence base, public consultation and stakeholder feedback.

STRENGTHS

- A friendly, kind, and caring community.
- A strong and recognisable market town identity, focused on the historic Market Place and independent town centre offer.
- A rich heritage and cultural offer, including James Herriot, the racecourse, historic buildings, conservation areas and local events and traditions.
- 78% of people that responded to the survey think that Thirsk has the facilities and opportunities to help people lead a healthy and active lifestyle.
- A strong enterprise base and surrounding employment areas, including industrial and rural business assets.
- Established community organisations, voluntary activities and local partners with an appetite to collaborate.
- Valued green and blue infrastructure, including Cod Beck and riverside routes, with opportunities for enhanced biodiversity and wellbeing.
- Good transport links with the A19, A1M and rail, supporting links to larger centres and visitor destinations.

CHALLENGES

- Transport and movement challenges, including bus frequency and reliability, lack of evening and Sunday provision, village links, connectivity to the station, poor walking and cycling routes, crossing safety and accessibility barriers.
- Town centre and public realm issues including a declining weekly market, lack of rest stops, cycle racks and signage, and the condition of some pavements and shop frontages.
- Economic challenges, including high street footfall pressures and limited training and skills pathways.
- Community, health and wellbeing needs, including youth provision, anti-social behaviour, cost of living pressures, access to health services and the need for inclusive facilities.
- Environmental concerns, including biodiversity, active travel infrastructure and the need to support energy efficiency and low-carbon choices.
- Capacity and coordination issues, including volunteer fatigue, groups working in silos and the need for clearer communication and community ownership.



Key opportunities

Opportunity area	Investment focus
Public realm and Market Place	Improve the Market Place, seating, greening, surfaces, signage, wayfinding, retail spill-out, event space and overall town centre attractiveness.
Sustainable connectivity	Improve walking, cycling, bus stops, station access, crossings, routes between Thirsk and Sowerby, and links to villages, employment areas, and leisure facilities.
Heritage, culture, and visitor economy	Connect heritage assets, Racecourse, town centre, Market Place and green routes through trails, digital content, events, and signage, helping visitors spend more time and money locally.
Business and skills	Strengthen the local economy through market improvements, pop-up uses, start-up support, digital infrastructure, lifelong learning, and links with employers.
Community life and inclusion	Improve youth activity, SEND and dementia awareness, community communication, lifelong learning, health outreach, and safe spaces.
Environment and resilience	Enhance Cod Beck, wildflower verges, biodiversity, dark skies, community energy, waste awareness, decarbonisation, and nature-based public realm improvements.



Stakeholder Engagement

Engagement Findings

Stakeholder and public engagement broadly confirmed the strengths, challenges and opportunities identified above and highlighted that people particularly value Thirsk's friendly market town character, heritage, independent businesses, access to the countryside, and strong community spirit.

Analysis of the public survey responses revealed that the most commonly mentioned concerns and opportunities for improvement were:

- Enhancing the weekly Market.
- Developing a town-wide events programme and improving cultural infrastructure.
- Providing a more reliable and accessible bus service.
- Enhancing the public realm.
- Improving transport accessibility and connectivity.

Analysis of the stakeholder and public engagement also identified an aspiration for active travel projects including cycling infrastructure at key locations, including cycle storage. Opportunities for community energy projects were also mentioned as well as opportunities for engaging the community, including younger people, in conservation and biodiversity work and supporting volunteer programmes for enhancing and maintaining green and blue spaces. Investment in parks and greenery was also encouraged by participants.

Sustainability is a core principle for the Town Investment Plans and is a consideration for all projects. Where relevant, projects will support and aim to reduce emissions, strengthen climate resilience, protect and restore nature, support healthier lifestyles, and make better use of existing land, buildings, and infrastructure.

Project design and delivery should consider whole-life costs, maintenance, adaptation, water management, biodiversity, inclusive access, and community stewardship.

Process

The engagement process has been broad and inclusive. Activity included core team meetings, internal and external stakeholder sessions, public drop-ins, one-to-one conversations, focused engagement with community groups, and a survey that received 483 responses. Engagement took place with councillors, local representatives, businesses, schools, youth groups, Women's Institute members, older residents, Community Works, Rural Arts, Men's Shed, seldom-heard groups, service areas and delivery partners.

The vision and objectives have been developed from the evidence base, public consultation, stakeholder feedback and in collaboration with the Thirsk Steering Group. They reflect the themes that were consistently raised through engagement: connectivity, accessibility, transport, public realm, the market, local business and skills, heritage and tourism, community life and wellbeing, and environmental resilience.

Throughout the engagement, there was a strong opinion that the vision and objectives should encourage local and community ownership and participation.

The objectives were assessed and refined through engagement with the Town Investment Plan Core Team, Councillors and the Thirsk Town Investment Plan Steering Group.



Vision, Objectives and Outcomes

Vision

Thirsk will be a friendly, distinctive market town shaped by its long history of trade and community. Proud of its heritage and independent spirit, it will support a vibrant town centre with thriving local businesses, welcoming public spaces, and year-round activity. With sustainable, accessible connections and amenities, residents, community organisations, and local businesses will actively shape the town's future, ensuring prosperity, opportunity and wellbeing are shared across all generations and areas. Thirsk will remain a resilient, inclusive, and attractive place to live, work and visit.

Objectives

Protect and celebrate Thirsk's market town identity: Safeguard Thirsk's historic, friendly character while supporting a vibrant independent town centre. Champion heritage-led design, high-quality shopfronts and signage, a well-maintained and attractive Market Place, and development that respects the town's scale and character.

Revitalise the town centre economy: Support a balanced mix of retail, services, enterprise, markets, events, and leisure uses. Encourage pop-ups, start-ups, a revitalised market, place marketing, flexible spaces, and digital enablement to boost footfall, dwell time, and local spending.

Connect people and places sustainably: Improve everyday movement through safe, inclusive and low-carbon transport, strengthening links between neighbourhoods, the town centre, the station, surrounding villages, employment areas, leisure facilities, and visitor destinations.

Grow skills, businesses, and opportunities: Build a skilled and connected local economy that works for young people and businesses. Support start-ups and independent and knowledge-intensive businesses, remote working, digital infrastructure, and clear local skills pathways.

Strengthen community life, services, and wellbeing: Support a healthy, inclusive, and connected community that is engaged in decision-making and local project delivery. Improve access to health, education, youth and leisure facilities, affordable activities, and safe spaces.

Enhance the environment, heritage, and visitor economy: Protect and enhance Cod Beck, The Flatts, green spaces and riverside routes. Invest in biodiversity, sustainable tourism, EV infrastructure, trails, signage and stronger cultural and heritage links between the Racecourse, Town Centre, and Market Place.

Strategy and Priority Projects

Project ideas were gathered from public engagement, stakeholder discussions, previous studies, service-area conversations and the wider evidence base. This generated more than 100 opportunities and project ideas across the Town Investment Plan themes.

Officers then worked with relevant service areas, community organisations and delivery partners to understand whether projects had a clear delivery route, whether they duplicated activity already underway, and whether they aligned with the emerging vision and objectives. Similar proposals were merged and projects outside the Town Investment Plan scope or timeframe were separated into longer-term strategic aspirations.

Projects were tested for deliverability, community support and public value.

Further NYC service prioritisation and project development will be required for relevant projects, including alignment with service plans and existing delivery programmes, business case work, mandate approval, funding availability and internal approval routes. These requirements will be addressed through the next stage of work. In particular, regeneration and public realm projects will need to align with service plans, asset considerations and wider capital planning processes before they can proceed to delivery.

The wider project list will continue to support strategic justification for future projects and funding applications.

The tables below summarise the highest-scoring NYC-led projects and the highest-scoring Community-led projects that have been identified.

• Short term (1-2 years) • Medium term (3-5 years) • Long term (5+ years)

Highest-scoring NYC-led projects

Project	Description/Outcomes	Project sponsor/lead	Term
Urban Design Scheme, Public Realm Enhancements and Wayfinding	A comprehensive public realm and placemaking project including a light-touch parking review, improved pedestrian movement, rationalised signage, accessible seating, resting points, greening, rain gardens, cycle parking and opportunities for flexible event space and town centre activity.	NYC/relevant service area	Medium
Thirsk Market Place	Phased highways maintenance and surfacing works to improve the condition, accessibility, and usability of the Market Place. The project is already progressing and links directly with wider public realm enhancements.	NYC/relevant service area	Medium
Leisure, Heritage, and Recreational Walking Routes	Development and promotion of green walking routes linking the town centre, community facilities, heritage assets, and riverside routes. The project supports active lifestyles, wellbeing, tourism and heritage interpretation, with links to Cod Beck Discovery and new digital trails.	NYC/relevant service area	Medium
Bus Stop Accessibility Improvement Scheme	Potential improvements to bus shelters, accessibility, and real-time information, subject to evidence and inclusion within wider transport delivery programmes. Survey feedback identified the town centre and station as key priorities.	NYC/relevant service area	Short / Medium

Project	Description/Outcomes	Project sponsor/lead	Term
Thirsk and Sowerby Leisure and Wellbeing Hub	Investment in leisure and wellbeing facilities, building on existing improvements including solar PV and potential gym equipment investment through Active North Yorkshire and Mayoral funding.	NYC/relevant service area	Medium
LCWIP Scheme 5 - Thirsk Town Centre to Sowerby	Active travel improvements including new crossings along Sowerby Road and small changes to road and parking layouts to encourage safer walking and cycling between Thirsk town centre and Sowerby.	NYC/relevant service area	Medium

Highest-scoring community and partner-led projects

Project	Description / Outcomes	Project sponsor/lead	Term
Cod Beck Discovery	Community-led environmental projects to improve flood resilience, habitats and riverside access, raise awareness of Cod Beck, gather environmental data and support future funding bids for a larger programme of green infrastructure and nature recovery.	Community Works	Medium
Bookmarked Thirsk	A funded year-long cultural programme led by Rural Arts, supporting creative events, community collaboration, inclusive placemaking, high street activity, pride, wellbeing, and regeneration. Potential to extend the project should further funding become available.	Rural Arts	Short
Community Energy Project	Feasibility works to explore opportunities for community-led renewable energy and local decarbonisation. The project could help respond to concerns around energy costs and support future investment.	Friends of the Earth	Medium
Thirsk 360	A collaborative community resilience and communication project led by local partners to strengthen joined-up working, shared communication, and stronger connections across Thirsk.	Community Works and Partners	Medium
Station Access for All	Thirsk Station has been identified for further appraisal under the Access for All programme, with the intention of delivering an accessible solution by 2029 however, final funding from the Department for Transport is not yet committed.	Combined Authority-led, in partnership with NYC, Department for Transport and Network Rail	Medium
Dark-sky Project	Partnership project to reduce light pollution and promote dark-sky awareness through a lighting survey, business engagement, identify demonstration projects, school activities, wildlife walks, and community events. Potential to link in with the Cod Beck Discovery Project, as well as opportunities to enhance biodiversity and strengthen nature corridors.	Partnership between Howardian Hills, NYMNPA and NYC. Events delivered by Howardian Hills	Medium
Coach Friendly Accreditation	A tourism project to support Thirsk in applying for Coach Friendly Accreditation, improving the town's visitor offer and helping attract group travel and tourism spend.	Herriot Group	Short

Early Quick Wins

Since the Plan was developed, some of the projects listed above, or elements of them, are now underway or ready to commence.

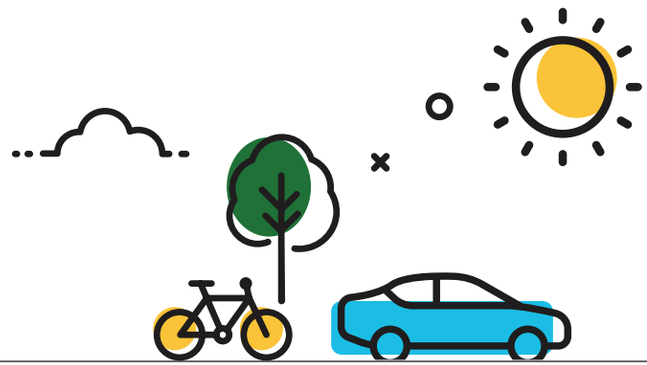
Project	Early Wins
NYC Led – Project 1 **Urban Design Scheme, Public Realm Enhancements and Wayfinding**	Light touch parking review to support further design work.
NYC Led – Project 2 **Thirsk Market Place**	Ongoing resurfacing works. Opportunities to link this to wider public realm enhancement activity.
NYC Led – Project 3 **Leisure, Heritage, and Recreational Walking Routes**	Initial walking activity linked to Leisure, Heritage and Recreational Walking Routes, including walks around Sowerby Sports Village and links to community organisations.
NYC Led – Project 4 **Bus Stop Accessibility Improvement Scheme**	Bus Stop Accessibility Scheme, install digital real time display in the marketplace.
Community & Partner Led – Project 1 **Cod Beck Discovery**	Data collection underway and other activities building on existing project coordination, community engagement and looking at future funding opportunities to extend the project.
Community & Partner Led – Project 2 **Bookmarked**	Has secured funding to deliver a year-long programme of creative events, community collaboration and inclusive placemaking.
Community & Partner Led – Project 7 **Coach Friendly Accreditation**	Discussions are underway to support an application.



Longer-Term Strategic issues

The following issues and aspirations arose through the engagement and project sifting process. They are important to record because they affect Thirsk's long-term resilience, inclusivity and growth, but they are unlikely to be fully deliverable within the Town Investment Plan timeframe or are dependent on wider policy, funding or infrastructure decisions. However, if future opportunities arise these could support wider regeneration aspirations.

Issue	Description
Bus services, community transport and rural connectivity	Engagement identified strong demand for more frequent, reliable and better-timed bus services, including evening, Sunday and village links. A review of community transport provision and usage is needed as part of the wider bus service review. There are some services currently available. This is a strategic issue dependent on wider transport planning, the countywide bus review and future funding. Feedback has been shared with the Combined Authority to inform the Rural Bus Franchising Pilot Study.
Station access and town centre connectivity	Station accessibility, step-free provision and connections between the station, town centre and surrounding settlements remain important. Some schemes are progressing separately, but longer-term rail connectivity will require partnership working with the Combined Authority, Network Rail, the future Great British Railways and other transport bodies.
Skills, further education and training provision	Stakeholders identified a need for improved access to local skills, apprenticeships, lifelong learning and higher-level training. Some shorter-term activity can be progressed, but a broader skills offer requires wider strategic planning and partner investment.
Housing growth and supporting infrastructure	Feedback highlighted concern that roads, community facilities, open space, health services and public transport need to keep pace with growth. This should feed into the emerging North Yorkshire Local Plan and infrastructure planning.
Long-term community and leisure facilities	Aspirations such as a Sowerby Gateway Community Hub and expanded indoor family entertainment or leisure provision are important to record but require further feasibility, land, funding and partner development beyond the immediate TIP period.



Approach to Delivery

The Town Investment Plan establishes a long-term living framework for investment in Thirsk, setting out a shared vision and a prioritised programme of projects to guide future decisions, partnership working and funding bids. All stages of the plan have been overseen by the Thirsk Town Investment Plan Steering Group.

Individual projects will be led by the most appropriate organisation, supported by delivery partners where required.

Identified project leads will need to develop the projects into deliverable propositions, seek investment, and take them forward into delivery. Delivery will be phased over time and will depend on funding availability, organisational capacity, and the development of detailed business cases.

Not all projects will progress at the same pace, and opportunities may arise to bring forward projects as funding programmes become available.

Governance, Monitoring and Review

The Town Investment Plan will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains aligned with community priorities, emerging opportunities and changes in policy. For non-NYC led projects we can offer advice and guidance on project development. Project leads will be expected to take ownership of projects and carry out their own development work. We can help identify funding opportunities.

Progress will be monitored through the development and delivery of projects, funding secured, partnership activity and the contribution projects make towards the Plan's objectives. New projects may emerge over time, and existing priorities may evolve as circumstances change

We will engage with local stakeholders when required to review progress, manage risks, update the pipeline and maintain community ownership.

Exit Strategy and Legacy

We will ensure funded activity builds long-term local capacity, leaves usable evidence and supports future funding bids and strengthens local partnerships while delivering the short and medium-term interventions.

Thanks and acknowledgements

The Town Investment Plan has been developed through a collaborative process involving a wide range of stakeholders and a Steering Group made up of representatives of business, community, voluntary, and Town Council representatives. North Yorkshire Council wishes to thank all of those individuals and organisations that have contributed throughout this process.

The following supporting documents are available on request by emailing **regeneration@northyorks.gov.uk**

- Public Survey Analysis Charts
- Full Prioritised Project Pipeline
- Evidence base and Supporting References

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNCIL

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