

Norwich: staff, elected member, stakeholder, visitor and resident perceptions. Final report, June 2018

Background

The Ignite research programme was commissioned by Norwich City Council to undertake a wide-ranging programme of research with key stakeholders over a period of eight months (October 2017-May 2018) to understand:

- their perceptions of the strengths and assets within the city,
- their long-term vision for the future
- the challenges facing Norwich as it moves forward.

Every effort was made to reach out and speak with a range of different people from different backgrounds, and with different relationships with the city. Over the course of the eight months we engaged with residents from all walks of life: visitors, students, business owners, elected members, Norwich City Council staff, and a range of stakeholders from local public services and the voluntary sector.

Overview

The city of Norwich, like many others, is at a pivotal point in time. This research has found that people love living, working in and visiting the city and it is seen as a real social and cultural hub for the whole of Norfolk and East Anglia. There is something special about Norwich which brings people back and means that people who live here don't want to leave. People like the fact that Norwich is at the 'end of the line' and that you don't happen upon it by chance. It is a place you need to mean to come to.

People in Norwich care deeply about the environment and sustainability and they are keen to see the council take a leading role to ensure the city becomes truly sustainable. They value the local universities and research parks, both for the thinking, but also the diversity and change they bring and believe they need to play a strong role in the city's future development.

People are proud of Norwich's rich history and feel the city brings together the best of modern and historic. They like that it is an ancient, but forward-looking place; that's a little bit quirky and a tad subversive and rule-breaking. People value that Norwich is a place where you can run into people you know, where you can easily access surrounding coast and countryside, and that it is a compact and walkable city with all the features of city-living, great arts and culture, restaurants and retail. All these factors mean that Norwich has a strong identity that people want to see protected and grown in the future.

Despite the ample challenges facing the city - including growing inequalities and lack of social mobility for some groups, isolation and loneliness, traffic and transport, the need to raise aspirations of young people and improve the quality of secondary and vocational education, affordable housing and quality jobs - Norwich is a place where there is considerable optimism.

For young people the themes are relatively similar:



The strengths identified through this consultation are largely aligned with those raised through more in-depth discussions, focus groups, conferences and 1-2-1 interviews (described in the rest of this section).

It is important to note that whilst people were on balance positive about the city, they recognised that many of the city’s strengths are not equally accessed by all the city’s residents (i.e. arts, culture, retail, restaurants, events etc.), and that one of the biggest challenges facing the city relates to inequality.

Norwich is a good place to make a life

The vast majority of people we spoke with love living in Norwich. There were numerous instances of people having moved to the city for a job, or to attend university with no intention of staying and who were still here many years later with no intentions of leaving. This positivity wasn’t just confined to ‘incomers’, (as some people referred to those not Norwich born and bred). There were also many instances of people who were born in Norwich and moved away only to return as there was seen to be ‘no place quite like it’.

Norwich is seen to be a special place by stakeholders, partners, residents and visitors due to its friendliness, quirkiness and having everything you might need to make a good life on the doorstep. Many people loved the fact that Norwich was a little off the beaten track, at the end of the line, and that you had to know about it to find yourself here.

Safety

While residents recognise that like any city there are less safe parts of Norwich, and that things may not be as safe as they were many years ago, in the main, people feel that Norwich is a safe place where people look out for one another. People who have lived elsewhere are particularly positive about how safe they feel in the city. It is worth noting that younger people were more concerned about safety than the adults involved in this research.

Sense of community and events

While some people spoke about isolation and loneliness, many more people spoke about a city with a strong sense of community where people know each other and look out for each other. A number noted that unlike other places they may have lived in Norwich it is very common to run into people that you know when you are out, and this is something they value.

There is a high level of awareness of community events, and everyone who was aware of events run by the council, like the 'staying out' campaign, Halloween, the Lord Mayor's parade and activities put on by The Forum and the universities really valued them. These open community events were mentioned spontaneously as things that make the city different.

Diversity

A number of people were frustrated about what they saw as negative and unfounded stereotypes of Norwich residents as being insular and a bit backward. The majority of people involved in the research saw Norwich's increasing ethnic and cultural diversity as a real strength and something which was embraced.

Ancient but forward-looking

One of the things that participants highlighted as being uniquely 'Norwich' was the strong sense of history and the city's architecture which they felt was not just about clinging to the past but protecting and celebrating history whilst keeping an eye to the future. Buildings like The Forum, along with the modernised hospital were singled out as good examples, and Castle Mall and Anglia Square were seen as opportunities to redevelop in the future. Many people were particularly proud of the historic features of the city like the cobbled streets, the cathedral, castle and old city wall.

Sustainability

Sustainability was a particularly strong theme at the youth conference, in the youth surveys and among some of the resident focus groups. Whilst some people saw Norwich as already being well placed and leading edge in relation to its sustainability practices others, particularly young people and some of the councillors involved in the research, were concerned that not enough was being done to protect and support the environment and that this would need to be a strong feature of any future 2040 vision.

Parks and open spaces

A number of parks and open spaces were singled out for praise by residents. These included more formal and kept parks, as well as more wild and open spaces. Participants valued parks not just for the oases of calm they provide within the city centre, contributing to both mental and physical wellbeing, but also as community hubs: places where there are a range of free activities that are accessible to all and places where people can interact with others who they might not know.

Many participants felt strongly that the existing parks and open spaces needed to be protected and the facilities they offered further developed by 2040. There was some concern that with future housing development and regeneration that parks and open spaces may be encroached upon and all participants were keen that this did not happen.

Arts and culture

Many creative and artistic events and venues draw people from across the whole of Norfolk and wider East Anglia with the city seen by many participants as a regional cultural hub. The Forum was highlighted by numerous people as their favourite place in Norwich and is seen as treasured, as the crown jewel of the city.

Thinking forward to 2040, many people thought that the arts and cultural scene would become even more important as they imagined a future where fewer people came into the city to buy everyday items which could largely be purchased online. Therefore, the Norwich City Centre of the future needed to be focused much more on experiences and activities.

Whilst many people involved in the research accessed arts and cultural activities and appreciated the 'free street art' available to all, they did note that many of the music, art and theatre events, even when subsidised were not being equally accessed by everyone and that more needed to be done to reach out to engage all residents in Norwich's thriving arts and cultural scene.

Restaurants and retail

Most people feel the balance of large recognised brands and independent, small, niche and quirky retail and food offerings is right for the city. The Lanes, Magdalen St and the market are all singled out as special places that make the city unique and are places that people want to see protected and supported in 2040. Castle Mall and Anglia Square were both identified as areas of an untapped retail opportunity.

At the 2040 conference and also through some of the focus groups, detailed conversations took place around the likely future for retail generally, and what this might mean for Norwich in 2040. As with arts and culture, people recognised that the future restaurant and retail scene would need to be about providing a quality experience for people which couldn't be replicated online.

Some of the stakeholders noted in their interviews that if a strong independent restaurant and retail offer is going to be a strong part of the 2040 vision that the council and partners need to think about what they might do to make it easier to start-up and run small businesses in the city.

Universities and research parks

Unlike other towns and cities where we have conducted similar research, participants in Norwich tended to be positive about the universities and students. The universities and research parks are not only valued for the sector expertise and jobs that they provide, but also the fresh thinking and diverse range of students and employees that come to the city as a result.

Key findings - Challenges

Similar to the strengths, when asked the top three challenges facing Norwich there was a high degree of convergence between what the 1,653 respondents to the budget and city vision consultation said and those areas covered in more detail through the rest of the research programme.

The top challenges mentioned in the budget and vision consultation were, homelessness roads, transport, parking and cars, education, cycling, jobs, Shopping, health and drugs.



Again, similar challenges were identified by young people through the youth survey with homelessness, housing, roads, transport and mental health as the strongest themes.



Growing inequality and lack of social mobility

The biggest concern for participants in the research was that not everyone was able to benefit from all the strengths and positives of the city; that some people are being left behind. This is a theme that runs through all the challenges described in more detail in this section.

Low aspirations, particularly among some young people

Several discussion groups and the 2040 vision conference spoke in depth about low aspirations among young people, who were not encouraged by their parents and wider social circle, as the key factor underpinning poor social mobility. There is a strong feeling across all age groups that Norwich needs to be more youth-focused with young people at the heart of the 2040 vision and that there needs to be a whole family focus taking a partnership approach bringing together not just schools, but social services, housing, employment and safety.

Secondary and vocational education

While primary and university education were both singled out as strengths, there is a strong sense that many young people lose their way through secondary education and that the quality and quantity of secondary and vocational education is not sufficient. Some people thought that more could be done to ensure a more holistic approach to education, including civic education and encouraging and supporting young people to have a more active role in the city.

Young people themselves, through both the youth survey and conference, were keen to have their voices heard and to take an active role in shaping the future of Norwich.

Substance misuse and street homelessness

Many participants across all strands of the research noted that street homelessness had markedly increased over the last few years. People were not advocating punitive measures to clear the streets, rather there is a strong sense that more needs to be done to support those who are in the most acute need and there is some concern that the impacts of benefit changes and council cuts mean that the issue is only likely to get worse.

Traffic and transport

Traffic and transport occupied a large proportion of people's time in the discussion groups. These are issues that are affecting participants' lives now, and while the research did not suggest clear solutions for the future, everyone involved in the research is clear that a comprehensive, environmentally sustainable, affordable integrated transport system is needed for 2040.

People note that once you are in the city centre it is easy to get across and around, but often it can be difficult to get in and this can act as a deterrent to visiting Norwich. If the future city centre is to be about high-quality arts, cultural, retail and restaurant experiences and getting in to work, then a transport system which reaches much further out into Norfolk and surrounding areas will be required.

Walking: Largely the new pedestrianised areas are well-received, and some participants would like to see further pedestrianisation and the whole inner-city becoming car-free.

Buses and trams: There are mixed views about the existing bus service. The pricing is felt to be variable and you can pay the same amount for a short as a very long journey. People are keen for existing buses to become more environmentally friendly and for the council to take a strong line on ensuring this happens. One participant noted that a bus and a taxi cost almost the same, and so she would always choose a taxi. In almost every discussion group the possibility of tram transportation was suggested.

Park and ride: While many people thought a park and ride service could be part of the future transport infrastructure the existing service was not felt to be well used, affordable or well timed.

Cycling: There were mixed views about the measures the council had taken to encourage cycling. Some new cycle lanes were very well received; however, others were highlighted as stopping abruptly leaving cyclists confused about where to go. The new Ofo scheme is viewed positively. Some older people, parents of younger children and people with mobility impairments noted that cyclists can appear from nowhere and more policing may be required to ensure shared use areas remain safe.

Roads and traffic: In nearly every discussion there were detailed conversations about traffic and congestion. People are sceptical as to whether the new NDR will help to relieve congestion, and many motorists say they are unwilling to give up their cars, or switch to public transport to come into the city until it is more reliable, and less expensive. Some groups suggested the council should be doing more to support electric vehicles and other sustainable forms of transport either through free charging points, free parking or other measures.

Trains: Many people noted that train travel is currently too infrequent and expensive which puts it out of the reach of many people. The quality of the trains was felt to be substandard and both London and cross-country routes were felt to need improvement.

International: The airport is seen as an untapped resource and that more could be done to encourage international travel direct to and from the city.

Economic growth and jobs that local people can access

Participants, including both representatives from the business and enterprise sector, as well as elected members and residents are concerned about the breadth of employment opportunities in the city and think more could be done to encourage both small and multi-national enterprise to be based in Norwich.

There was some sadness among some people about the loss of historic large employers in the city like Britvic and Colman's, and the chocolate and shoe factories of the past. Whilst some thought the council should be seeking to encourage other large and multi-national employers, others saw that the future needed to be based on a much more mixed economy.

There is a strong sense that people do not want Norwich to be a dormitory city, where people live here but work and socialise elsewhere. They wanted there to be jobs and opportunities to run local businesses in the community; and they recognised that there needed to be strong links between schools, vocational education, and work with families to raise aspirations, equipping people with the skills they needed to access work.

Suggestions included:

- identifying and encouraging particular sectors (that Norwich is known as a city which specialises in certain fields),
- schemes, and rate relief that supports and encourages local enterprise
- using planning powers to protect and develop small business space through use of pop-up and incubation space
- investing in tech infrastructure
- working with the universities and research parks, connecting with Cambridge
- running shop local, staying out, work experience weeks and similar activities which raise aspirations and encourage residents to support local enterprise.

Affordable, mixed housing

Whilst people living in social housing are generally positive about it, many feel there isn't enough affordable, social or sheltered housing in the city. People feel quite strongly that any new developments should be mixed (in terms of age, disability, private/social sector) to create stronger and more integrated communities. There is a sense that people are worried about large numbers of private estates and expensive housing being built as it is felt this will compound the existing issues around social mobility and inequality.

People are largely against high density, high rise buildings, and can see a future Norwich with more housing on the outskirts of the city or in neighbouring districts with strong transport into the city to access a vibrant retail, restaurant, arts and cultural offer.

Social isolation and loneliness

It is interesting to note that whilst the council and partners have data which demonstrate ongoing physical health inequalities in the city, this did not emerge as a key challenge through the research. Challenges were however identified, which linked social and mental wellbeing with increasing incidences of social isolation and loneliness. Young people were particularly likely to mention mental health as being a challenge nationally and within Norwich.

Whilst many people involved in the research felt that Norwich was a friendly city where people supported one another, they also recognised that some people live incredibly atomised and isolated lives and that both communities and local public services could do more to address this. This wasn't something seen to be confined to older people who may struggle to get out and about; but, was relevant to all people from all walks of life. There was a sense that with a future increased population, changes to the way we work and shop, and the continued impacts of technology that without considered action, isolation and loneliness would increase.

Conclusions and recommendations

People agree that Norwich is a great place to visit and live. The city offers a lot within a small area. It has a unique cityscape with a mixture of historic and modern buildings. Green and outdoors spaces are dotted all over the city and greatly appreciated. The countryside and coast are not far away, and the city is vibrant, catering to all interests with a wide range of events and activities that residents appreciate.

The city's cultural diversity has increased over the years and allowed the face of Norwich to change. From the universities, to the market stalls, the high streets to independent shops, Norwich has a unique atmosphere and quirky offerings.

But the city is facing challenges. Traffic, transport, street homelessness, social inequality, isolation and loneliness, lack of affordable, social and sheltered housing. People we have spoken with care deeply about Norwich, but they are worried about how to protect and keep the rich history, green spaces and all that makes it special in the face of the inevitable growth which is coming, and which is already putting a strain on the city.

Many people want the city to stay the same, others recognise that a more proactive approach to the future is needed and that the decisions Norwich City Council makes about housing, transport infrastructure and city centre redevelopment will all play a pivotal role in shaping Norwich for 2040.

Participants in the research, and particularly among the stakeholders involved in the depth interviews and future Norwich conference, believe that Norwich isn't promoting itself enough, and that the council has a clear role in developing and promoting a vision for the city, not just the council. This vision should share its achievements and promote what makes Norwich great to the UK and the world, in order to attract more businesses, and build sustainable communities.

The research suggests ten areas the city may wish to consider as it develops its future vision:

1. Be more **youth-focused**. Young people need to be at the heart of your 2040 vision
2. A better and more holistic **skills and education** offer matched with the new jobs and ways of working likely to be present in 2040
3. A comprehensive, sustainable, modern and cheap **transport infrastructure**
4. Mixed **affordable housing** that enables people of different backgrounds, incomes, ages, disability to live together
5. Better and more socially conscious use of **technology**, drawing on research hubs and putting in firm foundations for tech start-ups
6. Continued sensitive **regeneration** that protects your unique history (opportunities in Anglia Square, Castle Mall and Prince of Wales road) and better use of existing assets like the football stadium.

7. Investment in Norwich as the **cultural hub** for Norfolk so that the city continues to draw people with the quality of arts, music, cultural, food, and experiential retail offer.
8. **Enable different working opportunities** including new industries, shared office space, more start-ups, flexible working from home, and faster commuting to London
9. More **collaboration** at all levels united behind a shared vision (city and county, across the region, involving rural areas, between partners, and with a clear social role for businesses)
10. Continued opportunities and events which **bring communities together** like the Lord Mayor's parade, the staying out campaign, and the fireworks.