



CONNECTING KNARESBOROUGH

CREATIVE CUSTODIANS AND NECESSARY NEGOTIATIONS

Background

In 2018, Carey Tourism (CT) was approached by Harrogate Borough Council (HBC) to conduct a HBC-funded study for Renaissance Knaresborough (RK) to assess the feasibility of a proposed cliff lift for Knaresborough. Research was conducted in 2019, with the report being delivered at the start of 2020, assessing the proposal as being both feasible and desirable, whilst making a series of recommendations, which were well-received. However, the hiatus caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2023) meant that the recommendations were not actioned. Towards the end of 2022, Knaresborough Connectors, an organisation that had become extremely active during the pandemic, approached CT to progress the original study. In 2023, this led to an application to North Yorkshire Council for support through the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) to conduct a connectivity study. Led by Knaresborough & District Chamber, the client group comprised the Chamber alongside RK and Knaresborough Civic Society.

The statement of purpose included: "Knaresborough lacks a sense of both vertical and horizontal connectivity, as well as suffering from an ad hoc or non-existent attention to the street scene and opportunities to enhance both its historic and contemporary ambience. Vertical connectivity focuses on the challenge of negotiating the cliff edge from riverside to castle top, while horizontal connectivity exists due to poor access to the town centre from the larger town car parks. The latter leads to a cluttered and, in parts, car-dominated and congested centre resulting in a poor sense of place and an unsatisfactory experience for residents, visitors and local organisations. Potential solutions to this challenge have been circulating amongst Knaresborough groups for several years and have included a cliff lift, land train or equivalent, and significant efforts at street enhancements. Our proposed study seeks to gather the detailed knowledge to underpin ways in which these short-comings can be overcome, and by doing so contribute to the levelling up of Knaresborough through sustainable social and economic development. The study will show how an integrated connectivity plan for a traditional market town can advance the five local investment priorities of North Yorkshire Council (NYC), potentially providing a model and action plan for others in the NYC region."

The purpose is consistent with NYC's vision for 2025-2029 "to harness the power of North Yorkshire's natural capital, unique communities and businesses, continuously improving our services to enable a good quality of life for all", supported by the overarching ambition of "One Council with strong, local and customer-led services", and reflecting NYC's four key themes:

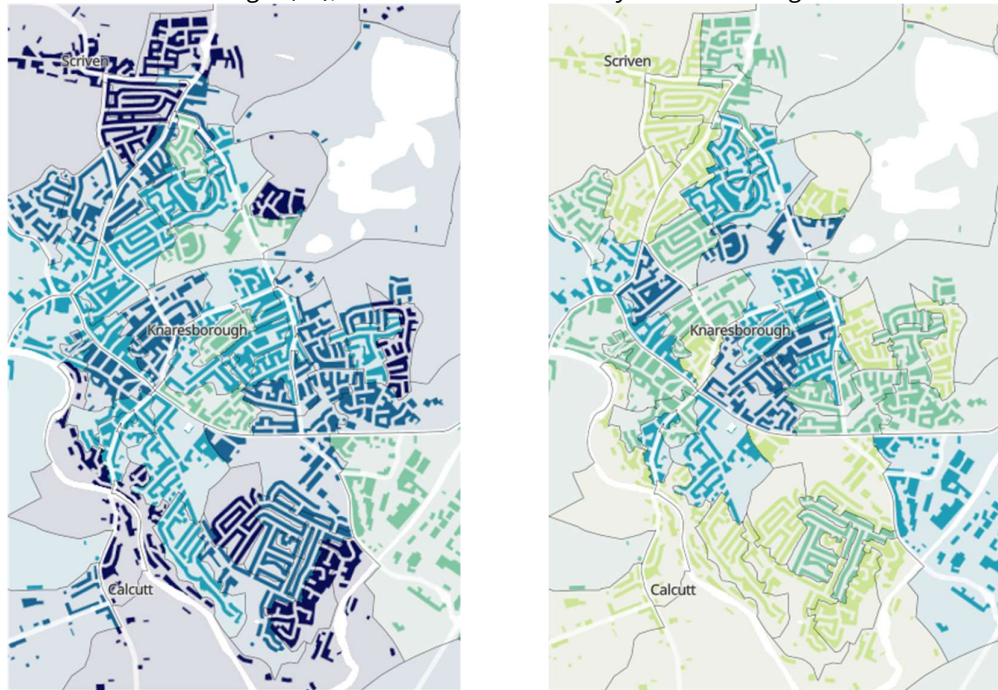
- “Support thriving places and empowered communities that live, work, visit and do business in North Yorkshire
- Develop more sustainable and connected places across North Yorkshire
- Ensure the people of North Yorkshire are safe, healthy and living well
- Maximise the potential of North Yorkshire’s people and communities”

The funding was approved, and this study has been delivered by CT with input from 56 Degree Insight. The main market research was conducted and analysed with a [report](#) published in 2024, followed by broad stakeholder consultations leading to this action plan produced in 2025.

Opportunity

For centuries there has been a disconnect between the river and the castle. Historically, the town essentially comprised the castle on the hill for nobility and gentlefolk, with artisans, farmers, millers and woodsmen beside the river and in the surrounding landscape, each week congregating in the local market that has been recorded since 1206 and has had a Royal Charter since 1310, making it the oldest continuous market in England. Significantly, the artisans and labourers had to climb the hill to sell their wares. There has been a shift since, with today the riverside (Waterside) and town's outskirts adjacent to open countryside characterised as being the least deprived areas of Knaresborough, whilst residential areas of the historic upper town are the most deprived with many experiencing multiple dimensions of deprivation. Overall, along with several comparable areas of North Yorkshire, Knaresborough is a relatively prosperous market town, with 63.5%, 60.7% and 48.7% of households in Knaresborough North, South and Central respectively "not deprived in any dimension", whilst corresponding measures of multiple deprivation for the three areas are respectively 6.6%, 7.0% and 14.1% with more than twice as many households in the central area being deprived as those in the others.

Figs. 1a, 1b: Areas of deprivation, with least deprivation on the left (1a) and with multiple deprivation on the right (1b), in both cases indicated by darker shading.



Source: ONS (Census 2021)

The reason for improving connectivity is “to enable a good quality of life for all” stakeholders in Knaresborough, including residents, workers, visitors and businesses, lifting the most deprived whilst also protecting the least deprived.

This study examined three elements:

- Stakeholder needs, in terms of connectivity and enhancement
- Cliff lift, long proposed to connect the riverside and town upper town
- Land train, as an interim connectivity solution

Stakeholder needs and perceptions

The viaduct across the River Nidd at Knaresborough is the most iconic view in North Yorkshire, and Knaresborough Castle is arguably the region's most important heritage. Research shows that the town has been overshadowed and become socially and economically disadvantaged compared to other market towns with a higher proportion of empty commercial properties, a paucity of childcare provision and growing inequality. The *Knaresborough Visitors and Residents Survey* (n=799) by 56 Degree Insight nevertheless shows a huge appreciation of Knaresborough by residents and visitors (past and potential) alike, albeit combined with frustration at the lack of connectivity. The full report is available online, with the following key points summarised here:

- Residents (n=299) rated Knaresborough highly as a place, with 90% rating it as “good” (30%) or “excellent” (60%) to visit, more than the nine selected North Yorkshire comparators (Harrogate, Helmsley, Malton, Northallerton, Otley, Ripon, Skipton, Thirsk, York).
- Residents’ favourite activities are riverside/countryside walks, visiting shops, going out for food and drink, and visiting the weekly market. The most popular attractions are:
 - Joint 1st Knaresborough Castle (98%), Market (98%)
 - 3rd Waterside (96%)
 - 4th Viaduct (95%)
- When asked to specify what they like about their town, residents described the friendly community, independent shops and cafes, riverside walks, castle views, and local events.
- Residents’ dislikes include empty shops and run-down buildings, traffic and parking issues, neglect of public spaces, and antisocial behaviour. The biggest problems reported were “parking availability” (38% “very poor” or “quite poor”) and “ease of getting between the castle top and riverside (33%); combined, these two problems encapsulate the lack of accessibility and connectivity between riverside and castle top.
- On balance, 93% of residents consider tourism to have a positive impact on Knaresborough, with only 7% assessing the balance to be “more negative than positive” and none “extremely negative”. Perceived benefits include:
 - helping to sustain local heritage
 - enhancing local economy and creating employment for young people
 - encouraging local arts and events that residents can enjoy
 - encouraging local investment and development
 - contributing to civic pride
- Non-residents (n=500) also rated Knaresborough highly (75% “good” / “excellent”) as a place to visit, only slightly behind York (84%) and Harrogate (80%), with the other seven in a lower range 50%-65%.
- The non-resident panel comprised 84% recent visitors (within past three years) and 16% potential visitors. Of these, 93% reported they were likely (“very likely” or “quite likely”) to visit Knaresborough “in next 2 to 3 years”. This was more than York (92%) and Harrogate (88%) and the other seven in the range 60%-76%.
- Similarly, on a scale of 1 to 10, 93% of recent visitors rate Knaresborough as 7 or more:
 - 10 31%
 - 9 20%
 - 8 31%
 - 7 11%
 - 1-6 7%

The highest ratings (9/10) are given by those that have stayed overnight and are from the more affluent (higher spending) social groups.

- There is a high level of consistency between past and potential visitors in their perceptions of Knaresborough, with the following attractions most often highlighted:

#	Past visitors	Potential visitors
1	Mother's Shipton's Cave	Mother Shipton's Cave
2	The Viaduct	The River Nidd and boating
3	River Nidd and riverside walks	Knaresborough Castle
4	Knaresborough Castle	Scenery and picturesque setting

- Considering that, amongst non-residents, Knaresborough is considered to appeal most to couples, retirees, families with children, and international travellers, the physical spread of key attractions highlights the specific challenges of access and connectivity for visitors.
- Amongst recent visitors, favourite activities are visiting shops, exploring the heritage quarter, riverside/countryside walks, going out for food and drink, and visiting the weekly market. Apart from the heritage sites, which are more of a backdrop and local scenery for residents, it's remarkable that, although the order is slightly different, the list of favourite attractions is the same for both residents and visitors.
- When asked to specify what they particularly like about the town, recent visitors, like residents, cite riverside walks, heritage, scenery, independent shops and cafes.
- Visitors' dislikes include parking difficulties, terrain (particularly for those with mobility issues and families with young children) and "accessibility between key attractions". The "steps between the waterside and the castle" and "ease of getting between the castle top and riverside" are repeatedly mentioned as barriers, especially for "those with limited mobility".

To address stakeholder needs, several potential developments were presented for consideration, and these generated a range of views.

Fig. 2: Respondents (%) considering proposed intervention appealing.

#	Intervention	Residents	Recent visitors	Potential visitors
1	Improved water quality in River Nidd	88	80	78
2	More small independent shops in town centre	89	84	85
3	More seating and wet weather cover in town centre	77	88	96
4	Encouraging more sustainable travel, including park & ride	78	71	74
5	Enhanced sign posting in town centre	74	86	86
6	Electric land train connecting castle and riverside	59	75	91
7	Cliff lift connecting castle and riverside	56	81	93

Source: Knaresborough Visitors and Residents Survey (2024)

Significantly, all seven proposed interventions were considered appealing by more than half of the respondents in each of the three groups. When asked to provide further comments, two important themes emerged.

- Residents are fed up with the poor water quality in the river and have little confidence that either the public or private sector will take the necessary action to address this.
- Everyone is supportive of achieving “improved accessibility” that could stimulate economic growth, creating jobs for young people and encouraging more independent shops. However, there is scepticism about implementation and maintenance. There is a widely held view, especially amongst long-term residents, that civil projects are often poorly executed and quickly neglected. Historically, failures were often blamed on HBC, which was generally perceived to have a greater interest in Harrogate; more recently, however, commentators have suggested that Knaresborough is now also receiving only limited attention from NYC. Nevertheless, whatever the reason and wherever the fault, there is no point in doing things on the cheap: excellence in design and execution is essential, and there must be a realistic maintenance plan.

Meanwhile, a parallel conversation was run for Knaresborough Connectors in 2024 by Crowd Wisdom Project (CWP) using the Polis AI tool, which “surveys people in their own words”. Involving 160 people (of which 58% were estimated to be Knaresborough residents) casting 7,878 votes on 143 statements, this conversation generated four key findings.

1. *Underutilisation of the Castle: There was a strong consensus that the castle is under-utilised and under-valued, suggesting a desire for more community engagement and utilisation of historic site*
2. *Community and Heritage: High agreement was also seen on statements relating to Knaresborough's heritage, indicating a strong community desire to promote and celebrate the town's history.*
3. *Divisiveness on the Cliff Lift: The concept of introducing a cliff lift was highly divisive, showing a clear split in the community between those it as progressive and those fearing it would detract from the town's aesthetic and heritage.*
4. *Most voters regard Knaresborough as far more attractive than Harrogate.*

In relation to #3, CWP commented on a critical media report about the cliff lift, observing that the “survey link... was shared by at least one media outlet. Of note, this media outlet shared the link in an article which contained an artist's impression of what the cliff lift might look like, which we suspect is likely to have shaped much of this conversation.”

Ultimately, there is one statement quoted in the 56 Degree Insight survey that perhaps best sums up residents' feelings:

“Connecting waterside with the town centre would be transformative. A cliff lift (PLEASE!!) and increased disabled parking.”

Cliff Lift

CT's earlier report, *Knaresborough Cliff Lift: Feasibility Study* (2020), confirmed that there is a physical disconnect between the castle top and riverside and between the heritage and shopping quarters. With many community initiatives and an emphasis on youth, wellbeing and innovation, Knaresborough has been exploring a range of opportunities to make the market town a more attractive place to live, work and invest, with several projects supported by the SPF. The existing 120 steps between the riverside and castle top are increasingly uneven and poorly maintained, and a more substantial connection is required. A mechanical link has been discussed for decades, with proposals that include a funicular and various kinds of lift. Despite legitimate concerns about aesthetic and environmental impacts, a beautifully designed and brilliantly engineered cliff lift has emerged as the most desirable solution. The idea would be to create a spectacular attraction comparable to Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* at Gateshead and which would also be extremely functional for both residents and visitors as an outstandingly sustainable transport link and as an iconic new viewpoint.

In 2016, RK conducted a survey with a remarkable response rate (n=651) representing more than 5% of the town's adult population, which revealed that 95% of residents (2015 estimate: 15,532) would "use a cliff lift between Waterside and Castle Top", whilst 100% of respondents declared the proposal "a good idea, even if they wouldn't use it themselves".

Some of CT's earlier findings are worth quoting:

"The cliff lift will attract new markets and increase visitor spend by extending dwell time. With the development of new enterprises and attractions, additional and upgraded accommodation will be needed... The biggest opportunity is to encourage and enable more (if not most) of the 58% of the 76,000 annual visitors to Mother Shipton to also visit the Castle level. This has the potential to generate an additional visitor spend of at least £500,000 per year within the town, even without additional visitors to Knaresborough. The cliff lift is the missing link to new markets and would be transformational, as it is the gateway to new income streams worth more than £2m per year. Discussions with a range of stakeholders indicate that, including gateway infrastructure, the cost of installing the proposed lift would be in the region of £3m, which is small in relation to potential economic benefit. A new footbridge and upgraded steps would be a relatively marginal cost."

As stated in 2020, the biggest obstacle to development is the lease on Knaresborough Castle, which is owned by the Crown (then H M The Queen, now H M The King) through the Duchy of Lancaster (DoL) and was leased to HBC for a period of fifty years from 29 September 1982. As legal successor to HBC, NYC today is the castle custodian and holds the lease, which will expire in seven years in 2032. Despite some informal conversations between individual NYC councillors and DoL and the promise of a NYC "working group", there is no evidence that any formal negotiations over the renewal of the lease have yet begun. It was clear in 2020 (and remains even more pertinent five years later) that "No potential investor consulted will consider involvement in the proposed cliff lift unless the lease has been secured for at least fifty years (and ideally more), not least because anything involving such as a short lease would provide insufficient security to a lender."

In 2009, HBC as leaseholder and planning authority had given "support in principle" to a pre-planning application from RK for a link between Waterside and the Castle, albeit subject to further surveys and all the necessary consents; an updated pre-planning application was being prepared by RK in 2020 to confirm HBC's position, but this stalled at the beginning of the pandemic and has not progressed since. Previously, a study by Camlin Lonsdale, *Knaresborough Riverside: Feasibility Study and Design Appraisal* (2007), had encouragingly reported that English Heritage "[b]roadly

support proposals”, but the view of the freeholder DoL had not been checked to confirm that there was no fundamental objection or concern that needed to be addressed. As well as recommending a mechanical link, the Camlin Lonsdale study had also emphasised two core recommendations from a contemporaneous HBC report, *Knaresborough Castle Conservation Management Plan* (2007):

- Policy 9: “Access to and around the castle should be maintained and enhanced”
- Policy 11: “The Castle, Museum and grounds will be accessible to all”

This approach is consistent with the *Knaresborough Neighbourhood Development Plan 2017-2035* adopted by Knaresborough Town Council (KTC) more recently in 2016. The Plan seeks to realise KTC’s vision for Knaresborough as “a place with a sense of community and a distinctive identity” that “will recognise and build on its natural assets and its important heritage and [where] culture will be cherished” and emphasises the “town’s setting on the River Nidd [which] will be its defining and connecting feature combined with the historic centre, the markets, open spaces, beautiful parks and the riverside” and “an integrated and inclusive approach to transport so that traffic flows, the town becomes less congested and there will be improved access for all modes of transport including sustainable options, with consequential improvements in air quality.” It sets out seven key objectives:

1. Achieving sustainable community, economic and environmental development
2. Conserving heritage
3. Incorporating green infrastructure
4. Sustainable transport
5. Community development
6. A vibrant town centre
7. Supporting economic development

Amongst twenty-four community projects and aspirations presented, three are particularly relevant:

- xi. Improve steps/lighting to Castle from Waterside
- xii. Reinstate the ‘Surprise View’ in the Castle moat
- xviii. Town Lift – funicular linking the Town Centre/Castle and Riverside would provide immediate access between two key areas of the town for visitor/residents, access for wheelchair users, those with poor mobility and parents/carers with buggies. It would also provide an ‘attraction’ for the town

The proposed “Town Lift” supports all seven objectives, whilst the other two proposals contribute significantly to an integrated approach that can realise KTC’s Vision.

One other proposed project “xxiii. A new additional footbridge over the river, to link the public areas around Conyngham Hall, Knaresborough, to the Public Footpath network heading upstream in the Nidd Gorge. ... This would also make various shorter circular walks possible.” is intriguing. There is certainly a case for a new footbridge, but it can be argued that it would be better placed at a position downstream to link Waterside with Mother Shipton’s Cave, which is Knaresborough’s premier visitor attraction.

In 2024, David Skaith expressed interest in the project whilst a candidate in the mayoral election for the York and North Yorkshire (YNY) Combined Authority, which he went on to win. He has since launched an Economic Framework, backed by the YNY devolution deal, which includes a Mayoral Investment Fund or “Gainshare” worth £540m over 30 years, which is £18m per year and is in

addition to devolved funding for transport, education and business support. Immediate investment priorities announced in July 2024 established four new funds worth £27.5m over the next four years:

- Vibrant and Sustainable High Streets Fund
- Carbon Negative Challenge Fund
- Skills Innovation Fund
- Business Innovation Fund

These are all relevant to the proposed Cliff Lift, which would advance the new Mayor's "three overarching ambitions" listed here and set out in the figure below:

- Transition to carbon negative – a carbon negative, circular and more resilient economy
- Deliver inclusive economic growth – a global, innovative, productive economy with strong and thriving businesses
- Increase opportunities for all – a thriving and inclusive economy

Fig. 3: NNY Mayor's economic framework.



Source: <https://yorknorthyorks-ca.gov.uk/growing-our-economy/economic-framework/>

This means that all current local authorities (LAs: KTC, NYC, YNY) are aligned in their support for a project that will deliver sustainable economic development, and a healthy and thriving community.

The problem, however, is that the central asset, Knaresborough Castle, is not secure, putting any proposal in jeopardy. Leaseholder NYC has not taken heed of the need to resolve this problem, but it must also be admitted at NYC has no statutory responsibility for heritage assets, such as a mediaeval castle, and nor is heritage conservation and interpretation amongst its core capabilities. Like many local authorities in England, NYC is facing financial difficulties and has recently increased residents' council tax by 4.99%, the maximum possible, blaming "one of the toughest budgets yet".

It has been suggested that NYC's lack of progress with the lease renewal demonstrates a lack of interest in Knaresborough generally and Knaresborough Castle in particular. There have certainly been staffing and capacity problems at NYC, but the timetable has been known since 1982.

With the apparent lack of interest, there is a growing argument for NYC to take the 'nuclear option' of letting the lease expire in 2032 and simply "handing back the keys". This would be unpalatable for Knaresborough and all those that care about Knaresborough's heritage and community, but it would force the hand of DoL and probably lead to the asset being transferred into the care of a reluctant English Heritage (EH).

Nevertheless, the advantage of this option is that EH has tremendous capabilities in heritage management, including conservation and interpretation. Their consent for a modern steel lift within Lincoln Castle using a tower and bridge system that creates outstanding accessibility to the entire castle site provides a precedent for the introduction of such infrastructure in historic surroundings, whilst EH's opening of Tintagel Bridge, an iconic footbridge facilitating access to Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, illustrates the value of design excellence in a heritage context. The recent conservation and developments at Clifford's Tower in nearby York show what EH can achieve with substantial investment and sensitive interpretation. The disadvantage of course is that DoL and EH would not be willing partners, and it would take time for new arrangements to emerge, leaving the whole of Knaresborough in limbo. As successor leaseholder, NYC would also be liable for multi-million-pound costs associated with HBC's historic failure to maintain the fabric of the castle over decades; conservation and maintenance requirements have repeatedly been identified through multiple surveys, including the *Knaresborough Castle Conservation Management Plan* (2007) by Atkins, representing a significant financial and legal risk.

If NYC wants to get on the front foot, it would be prudent for it to immediately start discussions with DoL about transferring the asset to EH in 2032 or sooner.

EH is a potential key partner for Knaresborough, but it must be a willing partner. In 2024, CT and EH discussed the prospect of the management/guardianship of Knaresborough Castle estate being transferred to EH when the NYC/DoL lease expires in 2032. The following is worth noting:

- (a) EH has only been independent since 2015 and is still developing financial independence and building up its reserves. It operates under licence from Historic England and has a wide range of arrangements for the 400+ properties it manages. It has the right of refusal to any asset being offered. EH is currently being approached by many LAs that do not have the funds or expertise to manage heritage assets, for which the LAs have no statutory responsibility and which are a drain on their resources, and most of these approaches are being immediately rejected.

- (b) EH currently has development plans (£5-10m each) for several key properties in North Yorkshire, including Scarborough Castle and Rievaulx Abbey. This means that they do not have the capacity or “bandwidth” to take on Knaresborough just now, but there is likely to be a different situation in a decade, especially if plans start being developed soon in advance and in consultation with them.
- (c) The strongest arguments for Knaresborough Castle being adopted by EH are (i) the relationship between King Edward II and Piers Gaveston 1st Earl of Cornwall, which is so important in “telling the story of England”, EH’s primary purpose, and (ii) whereas EH has no property in West Yorkshire, Knaresborough has a much more diverse audience (including visitors from West Yorkshire) compared to other properties in North Yorkshire and this is critical in advancing diversity and supporting community development. Showing that investment in Knaresborough Castle would support social and economic development in Knaresborough District and in other areas of Yorkshire would be an important component of the business case.
- (d) The most direct comparator is Pickering Castle, which is DoL owned and EH managed. As part of the agreement, Pickering residents have free access to the castle. However, Knaresborough is a much busier market town and has more potential for audience development.
- (e) At the same time, the keep at Knaresborough Castle is of limited interest and is unlikely to justify major investment (Clifford’s Tower scale) without a clear commercial opportunity, which at the very least would mean developing the offer (e.g. expanded courthouse museum and development of café, etc).
- (f) The existing conservation report for the castle, which was never implemented, is now almost 20 years old and would need to be thoroughly updated.
- (g) When the existing lease ends, there could well be an appetite for EH adopting Knaresborough Castle. However, an updated conservation plan would be needed with finance to implement it, along with a realistic commercial strategy for site development. This adds to an argument for including future museum plans in the strategy for the castle.

To proceed, there are two key questions that NYC needs to resolve with DoL and YNY:

- (1) What would the DoL do if NYC now issued a Notice to Quit to be effective in 2032?
- (2) What financial support would be available from YNY and DoL to develop the commercial strategy and implement conservation and other capital works between now and the end of the lease?

Rather than appointing another “working group”, there would be merit in establishing a “taskforce” that is empowered to conduct these conversations on behalf of NYC.

At the same time, given that construction costs have risen exponentially since the start of the pandemic in 2000, it would be desirable to appoint an architect and quantity surveyor to confirm cost estimates for building the lift (incorporating a renewable energy component) and essential gateway infrastructure, including restoration of the existing steps as an additional feature. This would generate a capital fundraising target and inform an updated pre-planning application.

This approach would provide a funded and transparent roadmap for all parties to manage the conservation and interpretation of the Knaresborough Castle estate in line with stakeholder priorities, ideally setting out a plan to deliver the cliff lift that Knaresborough wants and needs.

Land train

At the end of the pandemic, the disconnect between the riverside and castle top remained, whilst all progress with the cliff lift had stalled and costs had increased. An interim solution was required.

Consultations were consequently held with the UK's largest manufacturer of land trains, Severn Lamb, and with the UK's leading land train consultancy, Land Train Hire Nationwide. Drawing on their experience of land train operations in a wide range of often complex commercial and physical situations across the UK and internationally, they advised that a land train would be a realistic option for Knaresborough, providing a practical solution to the town's disconnect between riverside and castle top, whilst also enhancing resident amenity and visitor experience.

In order to test the proposal, an application led by Knaresborough Chamber was made to the NYC Economic, Regeneration Tourism and Transport Project Development Fund through the Harrogate and Knaresborough Area Committee (AC) for a £15,000 grant to run a road trial during the autumn half-term to advance the "*Knaresborough Land Train Feasibility Study*". Meanwhile, a range of cost options and operating models were developed and discussed with a number of potential investors and operators. The application to the AC was successful because the project was closely aligned with NYC and local priorities.

The application had explained the "*lack of connectivity across Knaresborough, making it difficult to navigate for residents and visitors, reducing footfall and spend in the town. Recent work funded by NYC SPF has confirmed the opportunity to introduce a land train in Knaresborough. The proposed road test will build the case with potential funders and investors. The aim of this project is to undertake a feasibility study for the provision of a land train operation that will benefit the local community and visitors alike. The proposed train will run for a period of one week (including a weekend) to assess suitability of introducing a regular service... This feasibility study will lay the groundwork for a potential future project involving the regular operation of a land train in Knaresborough. The refurbished second-hand land train proposed to be trialled in Knaresborough is available for purchase, and the road test would therefore be able to confirm its suitability. If successful, NYC Regeneration will work alongside local organisations (such as Knaresborough Town Council and Chamber of Trade) to seek funding to progress this as a longer-term project which will lead to increased tourism, improved local transportation options, and enhanced economic activity in the area.*" The strategic fit set out how the "project aligns with the ambition in the Council Plan to drive innovation and improve outcomes, supporting the vision to create a good quality of life for all. It addresses the key themes of Place & Environment as well as Economy. The project will support a number of priorities including seeking improvements to transport connectivity, supporting effective and efficient public transport network that meets the user needs, promoting local tourism infrastructure and to increase opportunities to use engagement with culture, arts and heritage to improve health and wellbeing. It also links to the delivery of the Economic Growth Strategy for North Yorkshire by supporting sustainable and healthy lives in Knaresborough, recognising the benefits that come from addressing economic, environmental, health and wellbeing goals together." In terms of local fit, "The project aligns with local priorities by supporting Knaresborough's regeneration objectives, which include enhancing transportation links, promoting tourism, and boosting the local economy. It also ties into broader community and environmental goals by exploring sustainable transport solutions that can serve both residents and visitors." The benefits were straightforward: "If positive, this work will support future bids for funding to progress this as a longer-term project, which would need to consider purchasing the train, converting it to electric, operating, storing and maintaining it. The introduction of a land train as a longer-term prospect will lead to increased tourism, improved local transportation options, and enhanced economic activity in the area."

A new electric land train would cost in the region of £320,000 plus VAT. However, following extensive research and negotiations, the plan had been to hire a second-hand petrol-powered land train for the trial, and then – if the trial had been successful – purchase that vehicle with a solid warranty at a substantial discount, promptly convert the engine to electric engine and then start operating a public service from the Easter holiday in 2025.

The following table provides a comparison of the two possible approaches.

Fig. 4: Estimated costs, comparing a new electric train set with a converted 2nd hand unit.

Cost	Initial capital outlays		Operating costs (annual)	Potential offsets and possible assumptions
	New	Convert		
Train set	£384,000	£72,000		NYC/YNV funding, cheaper sets have been identified
Conversion	£0	£60,000		NYC/YNV funding
Charging unit	£5,000	£5,000		NYC/YNV funding
Livery/design	£0	£3,000		Advertising/sponsorship
Licences etc	£3,500	£3,500		
Storage (containers)	£5,000	£5,000		
Training			£2,400	NYC/YNV funding
Uniforms			£800	Advertising/sponsorship
Salaries			£96,000	Volunteer/apprentice schemes
Accounting			£2,000	Shared service
Fuel/electricity			£10,000	
Service/maintenance			£3,000	
Marketing allowance			£3,000	Shared service
Insurance			£2,000	
Storage (rent)			£600	Peppercorn rent
TOTAL:	£397,500	£148,500	£119,800	

Source: CT research

This illustrates the substantial advantage of buying a second-hand train set at a discount and then installing a powerful new electric engine, reducing the initial outlay by £249,000 (63%).

The other consideration is of course revenue, and it was anticipated that price sensitivity would be explored during the road trial through a questionnaire about “willingness to pay”, further informed by market research conducted about prices charged on comparable routes elsewhere. There are three primary revenue categories for an operator. The largest is ticket sales to visitors, and the typical price point for a single journey elsewhere is in the £6-£10 range. Considering the number of visitors to Knaresborough, 50-100,000 visitor tickets would be a conservative annual sales target; charging a very modest price around £5 would more than cover operating costs.

Fig. 5: Projected annual revenue from visitor day passes.

Price	Visitor day passes				
	10,000	25,000	50,000	100,000	200,000
£4	£40,000	£100,000	£200,000	£400,000	£800,000
£6	£60,000	£150,000	£300,000	£600,000	£1,200,000
£8	£80,000	£200,000	£400,000	£800,000	£1,600,000
£10	£100,000	£250,000	£500,000	£1,000,000	£2,000,000

Source: CT research

The second category would be residents. Since, ultimately, the point of the project is to deliver benefits for the local community, it would be desirable to offer special rates to residents, perhaps defined as being any household with a HG5 postcode. Assuming pensioners and 'Blue badge' holders (and possibly others) would be entitled to a free annual pass, it would be reasonable to charge a fee for an annual resident's pass. Considering charges elsewhere, £20 would be a fair price, but local sentiment might indicate a lower price, especially when so much revenue is likely to be generated from the visitor category. If a sizeable proportion of residents were to purchase an annual pass, this would make a substantial contribution towards covering operating costs and repaying the initial capital outlays.

Fig. 6: Projected annual revenue from sale of local passes.

	Annual residents' passes				
Price	500	1,000	2,500	5,000	10,000
£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
£10	£5,000	£10,000	£25,000	£50,000	£100,000
£20	£10,000	£20,000	£50,000	£100,000	£200,000
£30	£15,000	£30,000	£75,000	£150,000	£300,000
£40	£20,000	£40,000	£100,000	£200,000	£400,000
£50	£25,000	£50,000	£125,000	£250,000	£500,000

Source: CT research

A third category is *ad hoc* but nevertheless important. Operators elsewhere have hired out their land trains for special events, such as wedding parties, transport for evening receptions or to enjoy Christmas lights. Land trains can also be used in feature films, particularly relevant for a location such as Knaresborough which is growing in popularity amongst film scouts and producers. Some potential investors have envisaged events during the summer that involve an evening reception at the Castle followed by dinner along the river, with guests transferring on the land train.

Given the alignment with NYC priorities and funding coming through a NYC area committee, it was anticipated that the road trial would proceed with the full support of NYC. Land trains are licensed to operate on public highways, just like cars, buses, tractors and 10 tonne 50 foot articulated lorries. However, when carrying members of the public as passengers, they require a Vehicle Special Order (VSO) from the Driver & Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA), which is issued on the basis of a permit from the local police authority North Yorkshire Police (NYP), which is issued on the recommendation of the local highways authority (NYC Transport), which specifically needs to approve the proposed route, whether for a temporary trial or permanent public service. Based on the experience of Severn Lamb and Land Train Hire Nationwide, this was expected to be a formality, especially as it was for a short trial to advance NYC's priorities, supported by local NYC councillors and championed by local Knaresborough organisations. Unfortunately, however, the trial had to be cancelled with funds returned after an impasse with NYC Transport.

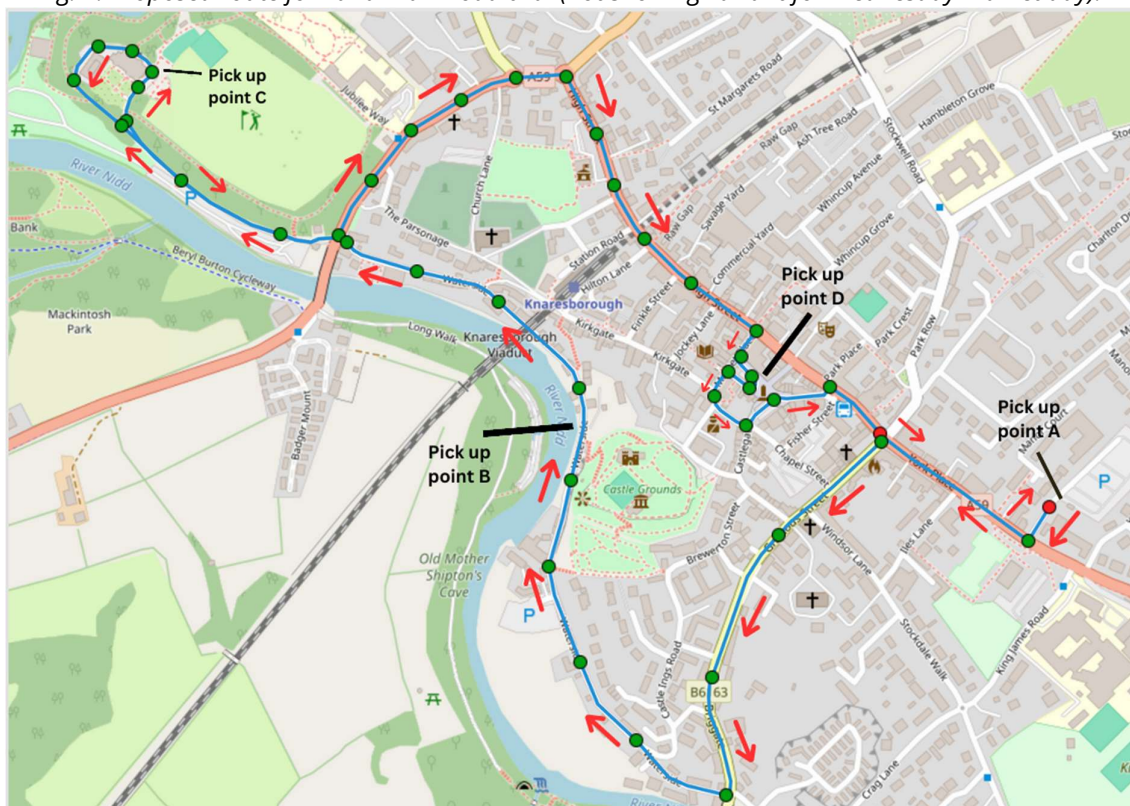
The trial had been planned for the October half-term, but the necessary approvals were not forthcoming, despite assurances and much chasing. The planned trial was therefore cancelled. Stakeholders hoped to reschedule the trial for Easter half-term, but the funds had to be spent (or at least clearly committed) before the end of the 2025 fiscal year, but approvals remained elusive. Apart from a lack of timely responsiveness by NYC, the two main issues that emerged were that (a) NYC does not seem to understand the nature of a trial, and proposed a number of restrictions that would have invalidated the trial as a feasibility study, such as not allowing the land train to be operated during "peak times", and (b) NYC Transport has not addressed questions about the

nature of the "Access Only" Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) with NYC Legal, which has implications for any potential investor/operator. At least, NYC had eventually suspended unusual demands that, for instance, the operator should be required to measure road surface temperatures. But, even subject to additional restrictions and after extensive conversations, no approval was given, meaning that no application could be made to NYP, and so the VSO could not be issued.

Investors and local organisations remain keen to explore the land train. However, without a VSO, the trial cannot proceed, and without a trial to test the proposed route and service, it is not currently possible to recommend the land train as a feasible option.

The route to be tested is shown in the graphic below. This was developed on the basis of physical surveys and the combined expertise of Severn Lamb and Land Train Hire Nationwide, and informed by the views and needs of local organisations and elected representatives.

Fig. 7: Proposed route for Land Train road trial (not showing variant for Wednesday market day).



Source: CT/KC, as part of submission to NYC Transport (2024)

The TRO on Waterside was first highlighted by a member of the Waterside Residents Association (WRA), and this led to further conversations. Residents and businesses on Waterside that have been consulted have remarked on low levels of public maintenance and investment, complaining about the number of potholes, lack of gritting, poor traffic management and enforcement, badly maintained public toilets, and other legitimate concerns around congestion, especially during the summer months, when the area is busy with pedestrians and cyclists. This confirmed that the current study has an opportunity to help address related issues in Knaresborough through a holistic approach, tackling local congestion problems as part of a plan for the whole town.

WRA's chair provided a list of proposals that they believed would benefit the whole of Knaresborough, including several that chime with the findings of this research:

- ❖ *Ornamental entrance archways to Waterside and the Market Square.*
- ❖ *Additional two storey parking on existing town car parks.*
- ❖ *Permanent covered areas for outside dining for cafés and restaurants, markets and entertainment.*
- ❖ *Children's playground – Conyngham Hall near end of car park.*
- ❖ *Lighting up Castle steps.*
- ❖ *Better use of Bebra Gardens. This could be an amazing Winter Wonder Land run by external investors with benefits to the town.*
- ❖ *Xmas lights on Waterside.*
- ❖ *Festoon lighting on High Bridge and Low Bridge.*
- ❖ *Bandstand in Castle grounds.*
- ❖ *Knaresborough House to become a Boutique hotel.*
- ❖ *Conyngham Hall to be developed into a Hotel, Conference centre, Restaurant, Wedding venue, Spa, Tennis and Padel Club.*

In terms of traffic management and congestion on Waterside, there would be merit in exploring a range of interventions.

- (a) Maintain and enforce the "Local Access" TRO, restricting deliveries to certain times, whilst permitting the land train, and ensuring emergency access at all times.
- (b) Introduce rising bollards at the northwest entrance off the A59 and at the existing bollard location to the north of Waterside carpark. These should be passable by residents and emergency vehicles at all times, and by deliveries and the land train according to agreed schedules.
- (c) Actively manage parking restrictions and ensure that SatNav databases recognise the status of Waterside between the two bollards.
- (d) Fill potholes and include Waterside on NYC's gritting schedule.

Many stakeholders are frustrated that Knaresborough's earlier BID (Business Improvement District) proposal in 2021 did not succeed, and WRA members involved in local businesses appear enthusiastic about the possibility of a renewed BID effort because this would help achieve some of the many proposals that have been made about improving Knaresborough as a place to live, work, visit and invest.

Next steps

Change is about politics, and, as Germany's first Chancellor Otto von Bismarck said: "Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best". There is no plan for Knaresborough that will suit everyone, but the current political landscape might be conducive to Knaresborough securing significant investment and emerging from Harrogate's shadow.

Politically, Knaresborough is a progressive rural constituency. KTC is majority Liberal Democrat (8 out of 12 councillors), and Tom Gordon, the MP for Harrogate and Knaresborough elected in 2024, is again Liberal Democrat (following the tradition since 1997 of always returning a LibDem whenever Labour is in power at Westminster). NYC is a minority Conservative administration (44 out of 90 councillors, supported by 3 independents), and its two Knaresborough councillors, Hannah Gostlow (East) and Matt Walker (West) are both Liberal Democrat, whilst the newly elected Mayor of York and North Yorkshire is Labour.

The following steps are recommended:

- The Mayor of Knaresborough should invite the Mayor of York and North Yorkshire to Knaresborough and convene a meeting about potential funding support for the cliff lift, land train and other improvements, involving KTC and NYC councillors and other business and civic stakeholders.
- The Knaresborough BID should be reconsidered with involvement from medium to larger businesses in the Knaresborough District as part of work with NYC & YNY on local Economic Development .
- With seven years of the lease remaining, NYC's Chief Executive should be mandated to establish a taskforce to liaise with DoL and EH to negotiate the transfer of the Knaresborough Castle estate.
- KTC should convene a meeting between WRA and NYC to agree a way forward for more effective traffic management and appropriate investment.

In due course, CT would be delighted to discuss these recommendations with stakeholders during a workshop in Knaresborough.

Benjamin Carey FTS
February 2025