

LOOKING GOOD

How Wakefield is becoming a hub for inclusive growth





Securing a good deal

Austin Macauley discovers why Wakefield has become a hotbed for investment and how it's harnessing growth that's good for everyone

When it comes to writing the story of the north of England's economic renaissance in a few years' time, Wakefield will warrant its own chapter.

It will be a tale of a city that punched way above its weight, defied convention, went the extra mile to attract investment and proved there doesn't have to be a trade off between economic and social objectives.

Half the story is already written. Despite being relatively small – around 325,000 people live across its diverse district – it has the 30th largest economy in the UK and in the last decade has seen its city centre transformed thanks to more than £400m of investment.

Stunning modern architecture, such as the internationally renowned Hepworth Gallery, has now joined the city's abundance of historic listed buildings, including Wakefield Cathedral and its 247ft spire.

Wakefield has one of the fastest growing economies within the Leeds city region, which itself is the biggest economic area outside London, and it now boasts two new train stations – both with direct links to London. Transformational infrastructure projects are well advanced across the district and new homes are being delivered at levels way above target. The next few years will see a pipeline of projects come to fruition – from plans to create a world class cultural industries hub to a business incubation centre – as well as a host of investment-ready sites.

The level of investment in this corner of West Yorkshire is all the more remarkable when you consider it's happened during one of the worst recessions on record and has been led by Wakefield Council in a period of unprecedented local government cutbacks.

Cllr Peter Box, leader of the Labour-run local authority, says the key to success has been the council's willingness to invest 'in pretty tough times' and to build strong relationships with the private sector. It's a proactive approach that seeks to ensure decisions are taken as

quickly possible and which seizes opportunities when they arise.

Many councils declare themselves 'business-friendly' but Wakefield takes it to a different level. When Peter and his officers discovered an entrepreneur was looking for premises in Manchester to open a creative hub they invited him to join them for the start of the Tour De Yorkshire in Wakefield, to experience the district and show him Rutland Mills – part of the city's historic waterfront area. The result? Wakefield will now be home to Tileyard North, the 'northern extension' of the world famous Tileyard Studios in London.

That dogged determination to seal the deal was never more evident than in 2008 when development of Trinity Walk, a major new shopping centre in Wakefield city centre, ground to a halt. Chief executive Joanne Roney and director of regeneration Andy Wallhead were backed by members to do whatever it took to save the

scheme. They charged to London and refused to leave the bankers' offices until an agreement had been reached. After much negotiation – and numerous calls to contacts – the project was back on track.

'When schemes like that stop in the north of England, what people see is a lack of interest and a place that's struggling,' says Joanne. 'That's why they take on greater meaning.'

'Our role as a local authority is to protect Wakefield – our place – it's about promoting hope and aspiration.'

Wakefield has changed a lot since then, not least in its self-confidence. It has gone on to form a strong partnership with the city of Xiangyang in China and is developing trade links with Poland.

Aiming for Good Growth

A willingness to be business-friendly and fight for investment doesn't mean Wakefield will accept growth at

Making the most of devolution

Backed by a £1bn deal from Government, West Yorkshire Combined Authority and the Leeds city region LEP are at the forefront of devolution in England.

Wakefield Council has a box seat in this shift with leader Cllr Peter Box chairing the combined authority and chief executive Joanne Roney leading on the skills agenda.

The local authority has already been highly successful in securing money from the West Yorkshire Transport Fund with seven schemes receiving investment.

The same goes for the combined authority's Skills Service with the council helping the district's business

to access funding that helps them upskill their workforce and grow.

It has secured more than £325,000 in grant funding, resulting in over £650,000 being spent by businesses in training and development. Wakefield is second only to Leeds in terms of successful applications. It's a proactive relationship with Wakefield seeking to make the most of the funding available and the close partnership working it nurtures.

'We are really comfortable with our proximity to Leeds,' says Joanne. 'We understand where we fit alongside our combined authority and our place in this city region. We know where best to collaborate and understand what our offer is.'



'We want to grow the economy but make sure that everybody benefits'

Cllr Peter Box, leader

any cost. Wakefield Together Partnership, which brings together business, council and voluntary and community sector leaders and is chaired by Peter, recently published its Good Growth strategy. It sets out how partners will work together to deliver economic growth in a way that works for all residents.

'We want to grow the economy but make sure that everybody benefits,' says Peter. 'We know some areas of the district are deprived and some people are finding it tough to make ends meet. We don't want to create a twin-track economy.'

'It's quite telling that the people who are leading on Good Growth are the business sector, Wakefield Enterprise Partnership, and they are totally committed to it.'

The confidence the business community has in the council stems from the local authority's track record of delivery – whether it's supporting businesses to grow, making it easy for new firms to invest in the city or pushing ahead with vital infrastructure projects.

Good Growth in Wakefield is also about establishing the links between different aspects of the local authority's work. It has listened to businesses and understands that they want to work with a council that is joined up in its approach, not just the strategic thinking, but in real terms. For example, by co-locating economic development and public health teams in the council's new offices Wakefield One, it's easier for public health issues to be considered as part of economic growth plans.

Think you know Wakefield?

- it has 8,700 businesses
- it's made up of one city, 11 towns and numerous villages
- around 60% of the district is rural
- it's one of the most accessible places in the UK by road and rail
- it has the 30th largest economy in England (worth £6.37bn)
- £213m of private sector investment was secured in 2015-16
- it's home to global companies including Coca Cola and Haribo

It's also about leading by example to encourage investment.

The council invested in The Hepworth Wakefield gallery as local government cutbacks kicked in because 'we recognised the economic importance it would have in terms of tourism and the benefit to the local economy,' says Peter. It took the same pragmatic approach when it came to building Wakefield One, a £30m facility with council offices, business facilities, a museum, library and social enterprise-run café. It's saved the council £1m a year and is now the lynchpin of the burgeoning Civic Quarter.

'I didn't get a single letter of complaint about the cost because we explained to people why we were doing it,' he says. 'It's now a public building that they feel is theirs.'

'We are a very pragmatic local authority, we have strong principles but we realise the reality of having to deliver a balanced budget and reduce some services. When you make these kinds of decisions you give the public a bit of confidence and that buys you a bit of patience – they can see we know what's important and that we think about the future.'

The council has purchased a number of key buildings in the Civic Quarter and is now working with developers to breath new life into them and ensure this area of the city complements the shiny new gateway created at Westgate station and the adjacent Merchant Gate development. Development like this and in towns such as Castleford will create new employment opportunities.



'Lots of people talk about good growth but as a local authority we have a totally joined-up approach... it's in our DNA'

Joanne Roney, chief executive

The Good Growth agenda is about ensuring those jobs are high quality and can be accessed by local people.

A skills summit, held in July, has been used to shape a new education and skills strategic plan to ensure children are ready for school when the start, to prepare young people for work and raise overall skills levels.

'Lots of people talk about good growth but in Wakefield we have a totally joined-up approach in terms of partnerships alongside an economic growth agenda,' says Joanne. 'It's written through us – it's in our DNA. It's not just about having a plan but also a philosophy and an approach.'

As far as the council's leader is concerned, the ideal conclusion to the story of Wakefield's renaissance would involve one thing: a university.

'If I could wish for just one thing it would be university status,' he says. 'I believe it would make a big difference. It would be good if young people didn't have to leave the district to go to university. A large number of people want that to happen – business people, the council and the college.'

The local authority and Wakefield College have secured funding from West Yorkshire Combined Authority for a University Centre, which will open next year and allow young people to study up to degree level. And through the Leeds city region devolution deal the Government has pledged to give Wakefield university status so that one day in the near future it will have a fully-fledged institution.

Seizing the initiative

With prime development locations, excellent connectivity and a proactive council it's easy to see why Wakefield is viewed as a great place to invest

Wakefield's resurgence in recent years is in part down to a clear understanding of its place in the wider economy.

Local authorities across the Leeds city region have a history of working closely together for the greater good of West Yorkshire and Wakefield is at the heart of that collaboration.

But as a second-tier city, it has to work harder than the likes of Leeds and Birmingham to attract investment, explains Andy Wallhead, corporate director for regeneration and economic growth.

'The public sector here has a stronger role to play in cities like Wakefield. We make it easier for development partners by removing some of the barriers to investment, for example through site assembly.'

Having delivered successful city centre developments such as Merchant Gate and Trinity Walk, office rents in Wakefield have risen and so have the returns for investors. Levels of interest from the private sector have never been greater and by investing in infrastructure and packaging up sites, the council is building on that momentum.

One of the most recent successes saw the council sell the grade II* former university campus Bretton Hall to property investment and development company Rushbond Group.

The mansion sits to the south of the district within the grounds of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, the jewel in Wakefield's tourism offer, and Rushbond plans to transform it into a top-end hotel with a conference

centre and business campus. It's a complex project and a number of conservation and ecological issues will have to be overcome to bring the project to fruition. Mark Finch, director of Rushbond, says the council's track record and reputation were a major selling point.

'We have worked very closely with Wakefield Council over the last few years,' he says. 'They have a very strong reputation in this region and a very positive

can-do attitude towards encouraging investment and working with you and being clear on what's possible, giving answers to any issues you have.

'They're very proactive in trying to harness investment opportunities. The authority is very well respected by the private sector as a council you can work closely with.'

It's a great example of the importance the authority



Civic Quarter

'Old meets new' would best sum up the sites that greet you walking from Wakefield Westgate Station to the council's offices. Directly opposite the city's shiny, modern main railway station sits Merchant Gate, a £70m regeneration project completed in 2013 made up of ultra modern offices and apartments.

Cross the road and you enter the Civic Quarter where the council's new offices Wakefield One stand close to the historic County Hall and nearby Wakefield Town Hall. From next year it will also host a new University Centre.

The Quarter is sandwiched between two of the city's regeneration success stories: Merchant Gate and

Trinity Walk Shopping Centre. It's predominantly made up of Victorian buildings, some of which are listed and empty, and on the face of it presents a complex development proposition.

However, in keeping with its proactive approach to regeneration, the council has purchased many of these buildings in order to get them 'investment ready'.

They include the old courthouse. Over the next few months repairs will be made to the roof and external walls to ensure it is structurally sound and ready for development. The council is already in talks with investors for this and the city's former police station with the intention of bringing in everything from a high quality hotel and restaurant to apartments.

Kirkgate

The Kirkgate area of the city is arguably the one place in Wakefield with the most untapped potential.

Sitting to the south east of the city centre, it already has a newly refurbished train station with direct links to London as well as major cities including Leeds, Sheffield and Nottingham. Once dubbed one of the worst stations in the country, it has been completely overhauled via a £4m refurbishment by Groundwork Wakefield last year – part-funded by the council.

The council is now pushing ahead with plans to transform the area between the station and the city centre. It has set about work to stimulate investment by managing a demolition programme of vacant buildings and by opening a £10m leisure centre in the area.

Following successes in the Waterfront, Merchant Gate and Trinity Walk areas of the city, the council is now well-placed to work with investors on its plans for Kirkgate.





places on forging strong relationships with businesses, not just at the initial point of investment, but on an ongoing basis.

Mark's views also echo the findings of a Local Government Association peer review earlier this year which found business partners 'have the confidence in the council to do the right thing for Wakefield and deliver on its plans, as well as in promoting the district more widely as a good place to do business.'

Mark believes the council's standing stems from a willingness to make sites more viable 'rather than sitting back and waiting for the private sector to react'. By being

proactive and making sites available and opening up discussions with prospective developers it has earned a positive reputation across West Yorkshire and beyond.

'They make it easier for you – they give you the whole picture and make it clear who you need to talk with in different parts of the council and will work to resolve any issues,' he says.

'When people invest in Wakefield, it's because they want to be there – not because it's cheaper. As a business you are looking for clarity, continuity, help and support, and dealing with challenges as and when they arise in a positive way. That's what you find in Wakefield.'



Investing in infrastructure

It says something about a local authority's approach to transport infrastructure when it is the private sector that has to play catch up.

Wakefield Council has been quick off the mark in pushing ahead with the £33m Wakefield Eastern Relief Road (WERR): from concept to planning within a year and set to be completed by December.

The reason it accelerated the scheme is it will unlock a huge amount of economic development for the district – as well as drastically improving connectivity and relieving congestion – and help Leeds city region to deliver on its Growth Deal. As a result of the relief road, derelict and underused sites at City Fields to the east of Wakefield which in council leader Cllr Peter Box words are currently 'landlocked', will be opened up to create 4,000 jobs and at least 2,500 new homes.

Planning applications are now coming in for the site and developers are even completing part of the road themselves.

WERR is one of many projects being funded through

the West Yorkshire Transport Fund. The reason why the council has been so successful in securing funds and attracting private sector investment is it adopted a Local Plan ahead of many other authorities, back in 2012, and has built up confidence with the private sector that it will deliver.

Indeed, a Local Government Association peer review earlier this year said early adoption of a Local Plan gave the council a competitive advantage 'because it confirms where infrastructural improvements are proposed, and who funds and provides it, in turn creating more certainty for potential investors.'

Other plans include the £25m Castleford Growth Corridor Scheme, which is expected to bring 4,000 new homes and 1,000 jobs to the town.

The council will revisit its Local Plan within the next year and is now working on transformational schemes post 2020 such as the South East Link Road – a project that will relieve congestion around Featherstone, Ackworth and Pontefract and, like WERR, unlock inward investment.

Wakefield Waterfront

Wakefield Waterfront has become the focal point of the city's urban renaissance in recent years.

Back in 2005 a Waterfront Masterplan was launched with the goal of transforming this key area over the next 20 years. Fast-forward just over a decade and the area has already seen radical change.

The Hepworth Wakefield, part-funded by the council, opened in 2011 and has established itself as a world class gallery and centre for creative arts and part of the Yorkshire Sculpture Triangle.

Wakefield Waterfront has also welcomed new employers in its mix of modern and historic buildings and city living at Hubble Wharf.

Next up will be Tileyard North – a creative hub from City and Provincial Properties to complement its world-renowned Tileyard Studios at King's Cross, London. The firm has purchased Rutland Mills from the local authority and plans to open recording studios, educational suites and even residential accommodation for people from the music industry.

The deal marks a major step forward in Wakefield Waterfront's transformation with Rutland Mills' complex of Victorian buildings being a key part of the original masterplan. Combined with developments nearby it's expected to turn the city into a centre for cultural industries.

Key to the deal was Wakefield Council's purchase of two remaining buildings at Rutland Mills in December 2015. It allowed the local authority to package up the site in a way that would give developers certainty for the future.



Home bankers

Wakefield is leading the way on improving housing supply and is even competing with the market to drive up standards



Last year Wakefield didn't just meet its housing target, it exceeded it by 21%. It was the only local authority in the Leeds city region to do so and is on target to do it again this year.

During 2015 the number of new homes in the district rose by a staggering 59% from the previous year – that's more than double the national average.

Given the nation's struggles to accelerate housing supply, what's Wakefield's secret?

In part it comes down to its wider approach to attracting investment: identifying sites, getting them ready for developers, building confidence in the market and working to remove barriers such as infrastructure issues. This has enabled major housing schemes to go ahead and ensured there's a pipeline for the foreseeable future.

But Wakefield Council has taken a more direct role than most by setting up Bridge Homes, a joint venture with Wakefield District Housing. The company completed its first development, St Swithins, north east of the city earlier this year and has already sold 27 of the 30 properties. A further two sites will deliver

140 homes in the coming years. Profits are being reinvested as part of a commitment to ensure at least 30% of homes are affordable.

Bridge Homes isn't just contributing towards those housing targets, it's also challenging the market to up its game and is building the kind of properties that private developers shy away from.

For example, a starter home at St Swithins includes a garage and the latest technology that allows you to control your heating via a phone app. The quality and spec outstrip anything else on the market locally.

By operating at lower margins than private developers, a wider range of schemes are viable and that ensures homes can be built in areas that would otherwise miss out. It will enable Bridge Homes to use housing development in more deprived areas to stimulate regeneration and growth.

Building its own developments also enables the council to avoid creating problems that it will have to resolve.

'We included drives and garages because we don't want to create problems with cars parked everywhere,'

explains Andy Wallhead, corporate director for regeneration and growth. 'It helps the council and makes the development more attractive long term. Because we are a partner in this we don't just walk away once the houses are built.'

'If dustbin lorries can't get down because people are doubled parked it's the council they will call. The council's interest is ongoing.'

Future schemes will include homes for young retirees, aka empty nesters, and the one property it seems no developer will touch: bungalows.

'People want to downsize but still need space for family to come and stay. But there's nothing on the market for them. It's the same with bungalows – but there's demand for them.'

Another success story in the district is the Castleford Growth Area's designation as a Housing Zone, one of only 20 outside London. It was brought about through the council's masterplan for the town and work with West Yorkshire Combined Authority and the Homes and Communities Agency.

The Housing Zone will be a major extension to the town, bringing 4,500 new homes and complementing other improvements to the centre of Castleford and its railway station as well as its new £6.1m bus station.

The council is also working closely with SMEs to help them find suitable sites to build on. Through its stalled sites service it 'speed dates' builders with prime sites for smaller development and so far this approach has identified enough land for 800 properties.

The council has also created a package of support to help SME builders get schemes off the ground and is promoting it via a Wakefield Builds engagement campaign.

Help for homeowners

Wakefield Council has launched a number of schemes to support homeowners who run into difficulties with mortgage payments. Breathing Space provides interest-free loans between £2,000 and £15,000 that are paid direct to the lender to cover arrears or regular payments.

As the name suggests, the initiative is designed to give people time to consider what their next

move should be, such as remortgaging or selling up.

Similarly, Homesafe is a mortgage help scheme for those aged 50 and over who took out interest-free mortgages, are at the end of their term and are struggling to pay the debt off. Launched this year, it offers advice, information and help and, if necessary, financial assistance in the shape of an interest-free loan.

Raising skills and aspirations

At the heart of Wakefield's Good Growth agenda is the need to improve skills levels across the district. Working with partners, it's doing exactly that and is edging closer to becoming a university city

Improving the skills of local residents is one of the key issues that Wakefield – like many areas – is currently grappling with.

Back in 2012 the council set up the Wakefield Poverty and Prosperity Commission and it identified low wages a key long-term issue in the district. Average pay is 8.1% below the Yorkshire average.

With the area increasingly attracting high quality employers into its regeneration areas, the key is to ensure both young people and those of working age have the skills and qualifications to access those better paid jobs.

It's a central theme in the Good Growth strategy. The district has a lifetime approach to skills – from supporting school improvement and post-16 education and training to investment in adult education and improving links with industry.

One of the council's strengths is support of apprenticeships, for example through the Think Family Apprenticeship Programme and Hub through which council staff mentor young people.

Easter 2017 will see the opening of a University Centre in Wakefield's Civic Quarter where students will be able to access degree-level education. Wakefield Council and Wakefield College worked together on the project, successfully securing £3.3m from the West Yorkshire Combined Authority's Growth Deal funding towards the £7m centre. (pictured above)

At the time of the announcement, leader Cllr Peter Box said Wakefield was 'now embarking on a new era where our aspirations for higher level education and innovation can be delivered from within the city'. He added: 'Our younger and older people will soon have the opportunity to access, close to home, the learning and training they need to reach their full potential.'

It's the culmination of five years' hard work. Having a University Centre was identified as a priority in the council's jobs and growth strategy in 2011. It's a prime example of how Wakefield unrelentingly pursues its goals until they are delivered, says chief executive Joanne Roney.

'It's really important for us to have the University

Centre to support aspiration to higher skills levels. If we're to continue getting more inward investment from knowledge based companies and advanced manufacturing it's essential we have a workforce with those skills.'

Crucially, the centre will help to further cement links between education providers and employers and ensure more provision is tailored. It will host a business incubation service run by Leeds Beckett University, which will engage private sector employers and develop new courses framed around continuing professional development.

The University Centre is the first step towards securing full university status for the college and the city.

Back Stage Academy

It's a lesser known fact that some of the world's most famous performing artists drop in to Wakefield from time to time – literally.

At South Kirkby Business Park in the south east of the district, Litestructures builds 'creative structures' that are used by musicians on world tours – from Lady

Gaga to The Stone Roses to Jay Z – not to mention major sporting and business events. The company even has a helipad to allow artists to chopper in and 'road test' the structures.

When these sets go on tour, so do Litestructures' teams of lighting engineers, assemblers and sound technicians. It means many employees are away for a year to 18 months at a time and that creates a shortage of staff.

To solve the problem, the firm set up Backstage Academy to train its next generation of recruits. Students carry out degree-level studies at the Unity Works campus in the Westgate area of Wakefield city centre and practical training on live projects at the company's South Kirkby base.

It's effectively a privately funded university and currently has 500 students – many of whom live in Wakefield – with plans to expand to 1,000. The company's not for profit arm, Backstage Academy CIC, a community interest company, provides Ready for Work training programmes and scholarships to enable people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter the live events production industry.

Growing the third sector and social enterprise

A key element of Wakefield's Good Growth agenda centres on how the council supports the third sector and social enterprise.

It is reviewing the way it commissions services and redrawing procurement processes to both help make third sector organisations more sustainable and deliver better provision.

It also has a social enterprise action plan in place that's designed to grow the sector through public sector commissioning and build capacity among existing not-for-profit firms.

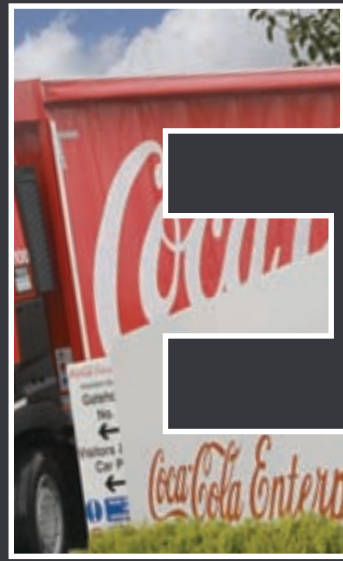
Working closely with voluntary and community sector support body Nova, the overriding approach is to change the way the needs of

vulnerable people and deprived communities are identified and to connect them with local social enterprise and third sector providers.

For example, a six-month Inclusive Change Partnership ran engagement events in Knottingly and Ferrybridge to find out what would improve life for residents. It's now being used as a blueprint for future work on strengthening communities.

The council is also working with community anchors, such as community centres, to use them to engage with residents, potentially deliver services there and make use of the many activities already happening.

Wakefield



T O B U S I N E S S



With major international businesses, world class culture and leisure assets, and great connections across the UK, the Wakefield District is in the prime position for investment.



Talk to us
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