

John Lewis

# Sheffield City Centre User experience

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Report to Sheffield City Council

November 2021

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# 1 Executive Summary

Fourth Street was appointed to review Sheffield's 'city centre user experience' (UX), as the background and starting point to the definition of future uses for the former John Lewis Building (JLB) in Barker's Pool.

This paper summarises conclusions reached through the following workstreams:

1. Extensive stakeholder engagement, including one-to-one conversations with more than 50 people from across the City Council, as well as civic, commercial and community organisations
2. Consultation with independent experts in architecture, heritage, urban planning and sustainability
3. Review of extant plans, policies and strategies that affect the city centre
4. Market research and analysis
5. Desktop review of current trends and 'futures' for city and town centres, as well as recent experience of department store conversions

In this paper, we outline the key issues identified and opportunities that exist for improving the city centre user experience for residents, workers, businesses, students and visitors.

This is a concise summary of a large body of research, but it captures and communicates the salient point that while Sheffield city centre faces a number of structural and economic challenges, it also has the 'bones' of a great place and a rich set of opportunities for realising that potential.

This is context, however, to an important and immediate question: what should the City Council do about the former John Lewis Building? We discuss this at length in Section 0, where we raise the following issues:

- Beyond the building itself, a defining feature of the JLB is its strategic location within such a large, central and prominent site that currently severs the link between other city centre places (Section 6.1.1)
- Sensitivity of the relationship between JLB and the commemorative, contemplative function of Barker's Pool and the Cenotaph (6.1.2)
- The scale and complexity of the building, as well as the challenges created by the current state of the structure, its fabric, M&E infrastructure, accessibility, environmental and safety systems (6.1.3)
- Climate emergency and the importance of starting from the principle that retention and re-use should be the default assumption, while demolition should be a last resort (6.1.4)

Set against this wider context, we considered three broad *conceptual* options:

1. Retain and repurpose the building (6.2.1)
2. Remove it, creating the opportunity for a world class public space (6.2.2)
3. Remove it and *partially* replace it with a building of much smaller footprint (6.2.3)

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Each approach is described at length and its implications considered.

At this stage – and in advance of wider public engagement – Option 3 appears to be the best option.

This is a bold solution that we do not recommend lightly. On reflection, however, and in light of extensive stakeholder engagement, market research, strategic review, and our own considerable experience of placemaking and destination development, Option 3 appears to be the best way forward.

The JLB is a problematic building, but its removal presents a wealth of opportunity for improving the city centre experience, making Sheffield a better place for residents, office workers, shoppers, and visitors. It would complement and add value to adjacent sites like HOCII and Fargate. And it would complete the ‘spine’ of a city centre that extends from the Moor and HOCII, through Barker’s Pool, to Fargate, High Street and Castlegate. Put differently, the Barker’s Pool site – absent such a large and imposing structure – would be an important piece of a city centre puzzle that is taking shape.

The potential to create a public space or park of world class design is then enhanced by ‘anchoring’ it with a civic use that adds character, creates a strong sense of place, and introduces a user that will support the programming of both indoor and outdoor spaces. It also provides the opportunity to house one of a number of cultural uses that may be in need of improvement or expansion (e.g. music, art, museum, leisure, library, etc.).

It is important to note, however, that we make this recommendation in advance of any widespread public engagement, which we understand is likely to happen early in the new year. While we have spoken to a wide range of civic, community and commercial stakeholders, the general public should be afforded the opportunity to express opinions and ideas for the site. In our view, however, this public engagement should be contextualised as part of the whole city centre and people should not *presume* the need to retain the existing JLB. Affection for the building and the nostalgia it embodies may be such that people prefer its retention in any event. Nevertheless, they should have the opportunity to imagine how the site might be used to enhance the city centre if the building were not there.

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# **Part One: Sheffield City Centre**

## 2 Sheffield is a special place

Sheffield is a friendly, open place with a rich history of innovation, industry, and enterprise.

For such a large conurbation, it is notable for feeling compact, intimate and easily navigable.

The people of Sheffield are its great strength – variously described as ‘open’, ‘friendly’, ‘welcoming’, ‘creative’, ‘collaborative’ and ‘industrious’, with a ‘can do’ culture that harks back to a history of craftsmanship. Once the ‘City of Steel’, Sheffield also identifies as a city of ‘makers’ and is often described as a city of ‘villages’.

There is a strong sense of place, pride and local identity. While other cities herd toward the ‘next big thing’, Sheffield is more nurturing and supportive of homegrown talent and grassroots culture. The ‘Made in Sheffield’ trademark is widely adopted and independent businesses are well supported in their neighbourhoods.

A full third of Sheffield lies within the Peak District. This underpins an ‘Outdoor City’ brand that is well known and respected. It is a compelling proposition that is likely to resonate even more in a post-Covid climate where footloose talent appreciates the amenities of a larger city, with easy access to nature.

For these reasons and more, Sheffield offers a high quality of life. It is a large city ‘that feels like a town’, with relatively affordable homes, good quality public realm and green spaces, and a general feeling of safety and neighbourliness. That Sheffield is regularly described as an atomised ‘city of villages’ – each with its own character, strong footfall, and local patronage – points to this higher quality of life.

This is also a challenge for the city centre. How can the city centre experience be improved as a complement rather than a competitor to these dispersed district centres and suburban neighbourhoods?

The Peak District is especially attractive at weekends and holidays, while district centres ably serve most people’s everyday needs. People have a wealth of choice for how and where to spend their discretionary leisure time and money. Without a defined identity and purpose, the tendency toward a ‘donut effect’ – where people abandon the city centre in favour of destinations further afield – is a material risk. The risk is heightened by a shift toward remote or ‘hybrid’ working cultures, which further reduces the volume of people who need to use the city centre on a daily basis.

The perception of Sheffield as a charming city of villages – while helpful from a quality of life perspective – also jars with the bigger ambition to compete with other cities for talent, investment, prominence and profile. It is described as a city of ‘spokes with no hub’.

There is tension between reality and perception, identity and aspiration, that curiously represents an opportunity for the city centre. This is the obvious space in which Sheffield can achieve its ‘big city’ ambitions without challenging the more tranquil atmosphere of surrounding neighbourhoods.

### 3 Sheffield City Centre

Sheffield city centre has some real strengths. The ‘bones’ of a great destination are there.

- High quality, well-maintained public realm
- Open and green spaces
- Characterful and distinctive built environment
- Low levels of crime and antisocial behaviour
- Strong cultural anchors
- A rich ecology of cultural, creative and digital businesses
- Two thriving universities
- A clear capacity to organise and host major events and activities
- New development underway, with good opportunities in the pipeline

To create a real destination, however, material improvement needs to be made in key areas:

- A better balance is needed between residential, retail, office and civic uses
- A more diverse residential offer is important, with housing options for students, young professionals, families, empty-nesters and the elderly
- Office stock must adapt to post-Covid working habits
- Accepting there will be reduced demand for retail space, there is an opportunity to find a better mix between national brands, homegrown independents, hospitality, leisure and culture to make the city centre as much about *socialising* as it is about *shopping*
- Specific focus on product and programming is needed for young people – from children, through teenagers, to young adults
- The rich supply of attractive public spaces can be better activated and animated
- The public realm in general is too cluttered, austere and ‘officious’ – it could be more ‘wild’ and ‘playful’ encouraging people to take more ownership of the space

There are three commonly recurring themes that embrace much of the above. These can be the foundation of a defined approach to all city centre interventions – including, but not limited to the re-purposing of the JLB.

1. An especially high **quality of life**. This is Sheffield’s great strength and much of it relates to its people and communities and the day-to-day ‘liveability’ of the place. Much of this is rooted in strong residential communities and district centres, so care must be taken to ensure that anything in the city centre complements and reinforces this message: that Sheffield is a better place to live and work, raise a family, and retire.
2. Lack of **prominence, profile and gravitas** relative to competing cities. This is often expressed through statements like ‘punching below its weight’ or felt through a lack of national attractions and institutions. It is emblematic of a tension that exists between some of the city centre’s great

strengths – low-rise, compact, walkable and ‘feels like a village’ – and the sense that this perception underplays its status and competitive positioning relative to cities like Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol and Leeds. Indeed, part of the reaction to the John Lewis closure is no doubt the sense that this decision was a ‘downgrading’ of Sheffield’s status as a top-tier regional city.

3. **Fragmentation and dispersal.** The city centre works well in pockets that are disconnected from each other. Activity is dispersed across different spaces and places of ill-defined purpose and character. Words like ‘piecemeal’ and ‘disjointed’ are often used to describe the development context. The spaces in between the places need structural and cosmetic improvement, notably to enhance the look and feel of routes that are currently uninviting or inhospitable.

Perhaps the most commonly recurring theme across a very wide range of stakeholder interviews, however, is the need for a compelling narrative that gives the city centre a renewed **sense of purpose** in a post-Covid environment – a straightforward answer to the question: ‘what is the city centre *for*?’

In our view, there is a chance to collapse a wide range of individual ideas, recommendations, interventions (see below) into three compelling and mutually reinforcing ideas:

1. A neutral, central space for all the people of Sheffield – a place that invites more people from across the city region to meet, socialise, play, collaborate and create together
2. Make the best of the city centre more visible – in other words, to encourage the good work that currently happens behind closed doors to participate in the activation of public realm
3. Improve the national and international profile and positioning of Sheffield as a major UK city

More people, more visible, more prominent.

This can be the spine of a narrative that provides the city centre with the sense of purpose that it needs.



## 4 Improving the city centre user experience (UX)

In this section we distil the main challenges identified by stakeholders across key areas and, for each, identify opportunities for improvement and intervention.

### 4.1 Public Realm

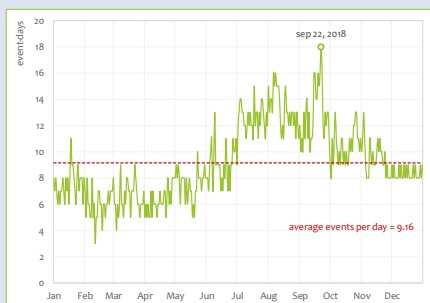
**The public realm is a defining feature of the City Centre, but it can be better used and activated.**

Sheffield is blessed with a lot of good quality public realm. It is well-maintained, and framed by a high quality, low rise built environment that is, in places, dramatic but not overbearing. The Winter Gardens is a standout example of indoor public space.

The activation of public realm, however, could be intensified. Public events are intermittent, inconsistent and of variable quality. A large volume of good public space that feels ‘inert’ can erode a city’s sense of place and cement the perception that *‘there’s not much going on’* in the city centre.

The best public spaces tend to generate a rhythm of activity – from large events and annual fixtures, to smaller recurring events, and day-to-day activities – that, in combination, create the impression that there is *always* something going on. A good measure of success is when people start visiting for no specific reason, but simply because they’ve grown accustomed to the fact that something is probably happening somewhere in the city centre. That level of programming is a challenge, but it is achievable with the ‘hardware’ (spaces) and ‘software’ (stakeholders) already in place.

The 2018 ‘what’s on’ calendar at King’s Cross. Shows the rhythm of events needed to create perception that ‘there is always something happening’. Includes exhibitions, health and fitness programmes, weekly food markets, etc.



Measures are already underway to address this, including Events Central on Fargate; planned pocket parks with pop-up activity; and SHU’s new public realm with its daily events and activation programme.

Orchard Square is being further developed with a canopy for outdoor dining and seven street food vendors for a communal experience. The creation of more seasonal or permanent canopies in key places can help to cultivate and keep the more ‘al fresco’ dining culture that was given a boost by lockdown measures.

It is also worth considering a bespoke city centre Event Strategy. The city already has a strong slate of larger and increasingly well-known events, including Doc/Fest, Grin Up North, Art Sheffield, Tramlines and the Sheffield Food Festival, amongst others. Key to achieving a higher intensity of events

– i.e. the feeling that ‘there is always something happening’ – is to develop a mixture of large and small, recurring and episodic, short and lasting, events of different type and scale. These might include:

- Seasonal ‘tentpole’ events
- Smaller, high-frequency events

- Spill out space for commercial and cultural tenants
- 'Receiving house' for pan-Sheffield events
- Digital and visual art installations and outdoor exhibitions
- Open-air concerts across all music genres
- 'Screen on the green' film and sport
- Sport, fitness and wellbeing clubs for local residents and office workers

The City should be an 'enabler' of activity, with an encouraging 'can do' culture. It should aim for a calendar that balances activities of different type, scale, duration and provenance, carefully curated to encourage local institutions, stakeholders, communities and promoters to view the city centre and its public realm as a viable resource and route to market. Ongoing work of the Future High Streets Fund is notable, in this respect, as it seems geared to providing precisely this type of impetus.

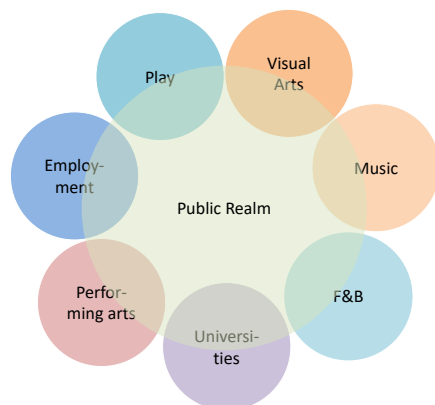
## 4.2 Outdoor City

**The Outdoor City brand is powerful and authentic. It mostly excludes the city centre, but it shouldn't.**

Related to the issue of programming and activation is the idea of bringing 'hidden' activities into the open. While the Outdoor City brand is powerful, it seems limited to the projection of sport and physical activity in countryside locations. If it is only the 'outdoor city' in the 'outdoor parts' of the city, then the place brand is not being used to maximum effect. There is clear opportunity for the city centre to play a bigger role in representing what it means to genuinely be an Outdoor City.

This does not imply that activities better suited to the Peak District – e.g. mountain biking, rock climbing, etc. – should be cosmetically or imperfectly simulated in the city centre. It simply means that cultural, civic, commercial and academic organisations could be enabled and encouraged to make use of public spaces (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Outdoor City Centre**



The Outdoor City – in this scenario – would not be limited to conventional outdoor sport, but would include, for example, open air film, outdoor performances, pop-up retail, an outdoor classroom, street

food and markets, al fresco bars and cafés, outdoor sculpture and art installations, street art, playable public realm, etc.

This requires the following:

- A public realm infrastructure that is capable of facilitating easy and frequent use by multiple organisations (much of which is already in place)
- An operational infrastructure to *enable* Sheffield's key institutions and stakeholders to 'spill out' into the public realm (e.g. diary management, events strategy, support services to facilitate licensing, permissions, etc.)
- A culture that incentivises and encourages this type of indoor/outdoor activity (e.g. by acting as a facilitator of outdoor activity rather than obstacle)

### 4.3 Playfulness

**There is a stern formality to the City Centre, which lacks a sense of 'joy'. The introduction of 'playfulness', colour and irreverence can be a useful instrument for enhancing the public realm and creating better connections between places. It is true to the spirit of place and, if done at scale, can help to differentiate Sheffield from other cities.**

The sense of inactivity described above is compounded by a look-and-feel that is perhaps too formal and regimented. This is not uncommon in civic spaces, where the pressures of management, maintenance, health and safety, can lead to places that feel austere and officious. There is a clear opportunity to make the city centre – at least in parts – more joyful, colourful and playful.

This can be a significant opportunity for Sheffield.

There is a growing worldwide trend to make urban environments more 'wild' and 'playful'. A look and feel that is too trim and tidy – 'don't walk on the grass', 'don't play in the fountain', 'no ball games', 'no skateboards', 'don't feed the ducks' – can feel inhospitable to outsiders, whether or not they even wanted to play in the fountain, walk on the grass or feed the duck.

The epitome of our tendency to over-regulate public space is our systemic preference for fixed benches over loose chairs. Benches are easier to maintain. They are easier to clean. They are not stolen and are less likely to be vandalised. But all evidence points to the fact that moveable chairs make better public spaces. That little bit of personal freedom afforded by a loose chair gives people a sense of ownership and a much greater attachment to the space. Hence, some of the world's best new squares, parks and piazzas – e.g. Bryant Park, Granary Square, Place des Festivals, Campus Martius, etc. – all feature loose chairs as an instrumental (not incidental) feature.

The antidote to this perception of over-regulated formality is to inject a sense of playfulness throughout the public realm. To create a place in which anyone – of any age – can be surprised and delighted by the quirky and unexpected touch.

Playfulness implies irreverence and colour: a light-hearted touch to the design, delivery and management of the public realm. It is the modern folly. The dancing fountain you can stand in. The street furniture that

is designed to attract, not repel the skateboarder. It is swings, slides and seesaws as ‘art installation’, which gives adults the license to play.

The silos of an old sugar refinery in Montreal are transformed into a climbing wall. Facility has since expanded to include an indoor venue to suit all ages and abilities.



‘Playfulness’ is a separate lens through which to consider any intervention in the city centre. Of every major project we could ask: what’s fun about that? How will this make people smile, laugh or enjoy the space a little more? How do we make this ‘ordinary’ thing extraordinary?

It may also be a simple way to address the sense of fragmentation and disconnection between different parts of the City Centre. Are there playful, colourful or artistic solutions to the grim corridors that separate one lively ‘pocket’ of the city centre from another?

This sentiment is at the heart of world famous projects like New York City’s *High Line*, Toronto’s *Bentway*, Calgary’s *Flyover Park*, or Seattle’s *Colonnade Freeride Trail*. Large and imposing pieces of infrastructure that sever one community from another are transformed into places to

play and congregate. Redundant railway lines become gardens and playgrounds; underpasses become mountain bike trails and ice rinks; grain silos become climbing centres; and any blank façade can be a canvas for colourful street art.

## 4.4 Retail

**In a disrupted, post-covid market, the city centre likely has an excess of available space fit for modern retailing needs. This could lead to a critical mass of vacancies that blights traditional shopping areas unless units are ‘dressed’ or ‘repurposed’ to introduce more cultural, leisure and F&B uses.**

Retail is a major issue for the city centre.

Beyond workspace and employment, shopping has traditionally been the primary reason for residents to visit the centre on a regular basis. This incentive has been decreasing over time and has significantly reduced as a consequence of the pandemic. City centre retail also competes with the choice and convenience of Meadowhall, as well as good quality independent shops in neighbouring district centres and high streets.

An immediate issue to resolve is the number of voids and vacancies in historic shopping precincts like Fargate and High Street. While this area is being significantly improved through the Future High Streets programme and initiatives like Event Central, a weak market and structural impediments (e.g. fragmented ownership by institutions that are bound to prioritise covenant strength over speed and flexibility) is likely to result in long term vacancies. At a minimum, the full benefit of FHSF and Event Central will not be crystallised without action to reduce the volume of inert space in prominent locations.

In the short term, there is an opportunity to make better and more imaginative use of void and vacant spaces so that they do not blight the environment around them. There are varying degrees of intervention to be considered:

1. 'Dress' the frontage such that vacancies do not become an eyesore or a signal of decline.
2. 'Use' the frontage, for example by installing art, information, interpretation or some other visually interesting or attractive function in the window (e.g. outdoor art gallery, museum, etc.)
3. Acquire or lease a number of units and repurpose them for a more active use. In this case, we would recommend working with established Sheffield organisations, encouraging them to engage audiences more directly through high street satellites (e.g. library on the high street; theatre on the high street; gallery on the high street; etc.)

Common to all of these suggestions is the objective of preventing voids from becoming a visible signal of decline. While it requires the cooperation of landlords, this is an issue of sufficient importance to warrant the effort needed to coordinate the activity of multiple owners and stakeholders.

## 4.5 Food and Beverage

**There is scope to improve the quality and increase the quantum of good quality, independent F&B in the City Centre. This will introduce more users of outdoor space. The city centre can be the larger platform for homegrown independents emerging from the wider food hall and street food scene.**

Sheffield boasts a rich variety of high quality restaurants and bars, different food festivals, markets and food halls. The city has a lively 'café culture' and 'foodie' scene.

This is also dispersed across different neighbourhoods and places, with an opportunity to define a missing niche for the city centre within the wider F&B ecology. This is especially important, as food and drink tends to be the focal point of so much social activity.

Dining serves a social 'want' as much as a biological 'need'. Improving the city centre F&B offer is thus important for increasing the vibrancy and vitality of the place.

Larger high street units were historically the preserve of national brands, mid-market restaurants, and fast food outlets. That market, however, was already overheated and disrupted even before the pandemic. There is therefore opportunity for homegrown brands cultivated in places like Cutlery Works, Peddler Market and Kommune to 'graduate' into larger, permanent units in the city centre.

This should all be done with a view to activating frontages and encouraging F&B operators to use the public realm. Measures taken through the pandemic to provide more *al fresco* dining should be taken forward.

Where possible, this could be facilitated through the creation of seasonal or permanent canopies to keep more people dining outdoors for longer periods.

Taken together, this approach simultaneously advances all the key principles outlined above. A homegrown independent that graduates from a Kelham Island food hall to a High Street unit would:



1. Become accessible to a wider catchment of people from across Sheffield (more people)
2. Put the 'best of Sheffield' on a bigger stage and platform (more visible)
3. Provide opportunity for a grassroots Sheffield establishment to attract national attention (more prominent)

## 4.6 Residential

**Sheffield city centre needs the housing stock to encourage a more diverse range of people to live there. Importantly, however, this needs to be accompanied by a wider set of day-to-day resident amenities including – but not limited to – play space for children.**

Encouraging more people – especially families, couples and empty nesters – to live in the city centre has to be a priority.

There is no better indicator of a strong sense of place than the willingness of people to live there, while 'family flight' is a sure sign of some deficiency. This is why the 'popsicle test' has been synonymous with urbanist theory since the 1970s and why, more recently, children are described as the 'indicator species' of places that work.

To build vibrancy around the prospect of more people living in the City Centre, there has to be diversity. The aim should be a balanced community, especially across the demographic spectrum and people in different life stages.

We understand that residential provision in the city centre is set to increase, with a central area strategy currently being developed by the City Council with Deloitte. This work identifies the need for characterful neighbourhoods defined by a more differentiated residential offer that includes families and older people, alongside student housing and smaller flats.

## 4.7 Employment

**Hybrid working has the potential to decrease the amount of time spent in city centre; but it may also change the way workers *use* the city centre. The city is also attracting more interest from 'knowledge industry' companies that benefit from the networking effects of diverse and inclusive social environments. A good supply of space to meet, socialise, play and dine is therefore important for advancing the city's employment, productivity and workspace agendas.**

Just as it is important to the resiliency and character of a city centre for people to *live* there, it is important that – even in a post-pandemic environment – people continue to *work* there.

The office is changing, adapting to a 'hybrid' working culture, where employees balance some remote working with fewer days in the office. Office space is thus being reorganised and repurposed for these new working methods, with larger meeting spaces, more hotdesking, social environments, and 'zoom rooms', etc..

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There are also indications of strong demand for office space spurred by the 'north shoring' of London and South East companies, attracted to the better value and higher quality of life in Sheffield. Lettings and take-up of city centre office space are back to pre-pandemic levels, with HOC in advanced negotiations for nearly 40,000 sq.ft of offices. There is particular demand for specialist labs and workspaces for businesses in the digital, tech and life sciences sectors. This is significant inasmuch as agglomeration effects typically associated with these knowledge-intensive sectors require an environment that encourages spontaneous networking between companies and individuals. The economic, property and social aspects of the city centre thus become part and parcel of the same system.

With strong district centres, vibrant suburban neighbourhoods and such close proximity to the Peak District, the incentive to stay close to home is stronger in Sheffield than it is elsewhere. Encouraging workers to use the city centre will likely require a much improved experience.

That said, it is not certain that reduced city centre commuting will have a direct and lasting impact on spend and thus the viability of businesses. It is often observed that, in Sheffield, with such easy movement between the city centre, district centres and the suburbs, it is common for workers to go home at the end of the day rather than dining, shopping or socialising after work. It is entirely possible that with less 'workaday' time spent in the city centre and with fewer occasions to socialise face-to-face with colleagues, clients and co-workers, people will use the city centre *differently* even if they use it *less*.

Crystallising this opportunity, however, requires a mix of city centre uses and amenities that are tailored to the needs of commuting workers. This points to the need for more cultural and social activities, more outdoor events and activities, and a larger supply of good quality F&B.

## 5 The Outdoor City

A neat device to encapsulate all the above would be the notion of the City Centre at the heart of the Outdoor City.

This is not intended as a strapline or brand, but merely as the spine of a narrative that can unite all the various projects, programmes and interventions that are currently underway.

It is consistent with an idea and a brand that already has traction: The Outdoor City.

It incorporates the key principles outlined above: *more people, more visible, more prominent*.

- a place where everything is more *visible* (**outdoor**);
- a chance to raise the *prominence* of Sheffield as something more than ‘a big village’ (**city**);
- a place for *all the people* of Sheffield (**centre**).

Nested in this very simple notion are all the opportunities we summarised above, united by the idea of making the city centre a better day-to-day experience for the people who live, study and work in and around Sheffield.

While this may seem trite or simplistic, it has the effect of shifting focus from the ‘episodic’ to the ‘everyday’.

Outdoor theatre (Hull), outdoor fitness (Toronto), outdoor classroom (Southampton), outdoor library (New York). There can be an ‘open air’ expression to almost everything we do.



The city centre should be a place that everyone is willing, even eager, to visit – not two or three times a year (a destination), but once or twice per week (a place). That regularity is key and it requires high quality public realm, activated through programming, and surrounded by experiential product and a set of institutions (civic, commercial and community) with a high propensity to use the open space.

It demands a different outlook and discipline and different lens through which to consider opportunities as they emerge. An events strategy, for example, might include half a dozen ‘tentpole’ events that attract 40k or 50k people over a weekend; but will it produce the 250-300 events per annum – of all types and sizes – that

are needed to ensure that there is *always* something happening in the City Centre? Similarly, retail and F&B opportunities should be evaluated as much on their ability to activate space as they are on traditional measures like rent and covenant.

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The city centre user experience can certainly be improved for tourists. But we consider it important to prioritise the 'everyday' experience for residents, workers, students and businesses – in the first instance – and then embellish, adapt or scale-up that core product for the benefit of visitors.

This is all consistent with the idea that a place that is naturally colonised by local people will be attractive to visitors. The opposite is rarely true. A preoccupation with tourists can easily become a distraction. It is not to suggest that tourism is unwelcome or discouraged. Far from it. It is simply a recognition that tourists are more likely to be drawn to areas that are known to be popular with residents. People like to *be where people are*.

By creating an active and inviting environment that is populated, programmed and 'owned' by its community, visitors will come from further afield. Tourism, in other words, should be thought of as the consequence – not the goal – of a thoughtful and forward looking destination strategy.

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## **Part Two: The Former John Lewis Building**



## 6 Former John Lewis Building

The sections above provide valuable context for understanding the challenges, strengths and opportunity of the city centre. This is necessary for appreciating an original question of the brief: what to do with the former John Lewis Building. In this section, we consider some of the key issues (Section 6.1) that help to define options for the JLB (6.2), and inform a choice between them (6.3).

### 6.1 Key Issues

#### 6.1.1 Strategic Location

The location of the JLB is extraordinarily important for its centrality, scale, history and prominence.

It is an important ‘connector’ between different city centre destinations, including Peace Gardens, Barker’s Pool, and City Hall. It is especially worth noting, however, its strategic positioning on a single stretch that connects The Moor, through Heart of the City II, with Fargate, High Street and, ultimately, Castlegate.

This line of distinct spaces – of varying character and function – represents the ‘spine’ of the city centre, which would be considerably enhanced by effective resolution of the JLB site.

#### 6.1.2 Cenotaph and Barker’s Pool

We are mindful of the JLB’s positioning in Barker’s Pool, which is framed by the important architecture and function of City Hall and the presence of the Cenotaph.

The Cenotaph is a Grade II\* Listed war memorial, dedicated in 1925, that remains the focal point of Sheffield’s remembrance events.

While it is important for any city to have one or more public places to ‘celebrate’, they also need places that are more ‘contemplative’, with the solemnity and gravitas to allow some measure of reflection on momentous events.

For completeness, we briefly surveyed similar spaces and cenotaphs in other large UK cities, including Leeds, Liverpool, Glasgow and Southampton. In almost all cases, the space is reserved for commemorations and remembrance day ceremonies, and – in some cases – they are the focus of public demonstrations and protests. It is rare to see city celebrations or special events take place in the same space as the main war memorial. Many war memorials, however, are situated opposite landmark buildings or within larger public spaces, which are more likely to double as outdoor event venues.

The general trend is for major events to take place *near* but not in the same space as a major memorial.

#### 6.1.3 Scale and complexity

The sheer scale of the JLB is a challenge.

The total floorspace – inclusive of storage, plant and circulation space – is over 200k square feet.

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A comprehensive refurbishment and conversion to some non-retail use – several of which have already been suggested by different individuals and organisations – would incur significant capital expenditure, even before inclusion of exceptional costs related to asbestos removal and the complete overhaul of fire suppression systems, vertical circulation, ventilation, and structural improvements.

By contrast – staying true to the original intent, purpose and design of the building – a focus on retail uses or food and beverage would require less structural change. This need not be a like-for-like replacement of one department store for another. Several consultees have suggested some form of ‘experience retail’ or a clustering of independent traders and designer/makers in a ‘market style’ configuration. Another company has also put forward a specific proposal for a food hall, while others have suggested a high quality rooftop garden.

However, any retail opportunity needs to be set against the material risk of displacing activity from elsewhere in the city centre. In light of significant disruption to that market – starkly evidenced by the current state of persistent voids on Fargate and High Street – it is difficult to imagine that any form of retail, destination F&B, or even the current vogue of ‘competitive socialising’ could occupy that much space without causing displacement from other parts of the city.

Added to the issue of scale is one of complexity.

The latest condition surveys and asbestos reports recommend significant intervention in the structure to make it useable for almost any conceivable purpose. Fire protection coating is in poor condition and some fire suppression systems are non-operational. Visual inspection found evidence of damaged beams and widespread corrosion. One of three boilers is no longer operational and the other two are dated and in need of replacement. Maintenance of HVAC systems is complicated by the asbestos in the pipework. Kitchen ventilation systems, ceiling extracts, electrical substations, emergency generators and building control systems – most of which are between 40 and 60 years old – require wholesale replacement for being well beyond the end of their useful lives. Consistent with buildings of that era and the construction methods and conventions of the time, the thermal performance of the façade is well below current standards.

On balance it is likely that much of the structure and internal systems are compromised and in need of major repair or, more likely, replacement. All of this is need to simply to make the building useable for *any* purpose.

A subsidiary question is the level of structural intervention needed to make the building fit for any purpose that is not a like-for-like replacement of one retail use for another. This is likely to be substantial. The building was designed for the sole purpose of housing a department store. Any alternative use would require major redevelopment, not least to bring natural light deeper into the structure, improve circulation, and meet modern standards for energy efficiency, public safety and DDA compliance. More ambitious cultural uses like art galleries, museums or libraries, would also require higher environmental standards to preserve collections, while other cultural uses (e.g. music venues or meeting spaces) would require specific acoustic improvements and the likely removal of slabs to raise floor-to-ceiling heights.

In short, while it is relatively easy to conceive of uses that would benefit from the location, scale and prominence of the JLB – and in advance of any firm proposal or costed design – we assume that any re-use option would require a large capital budget (i.e. easily in excess of £20 million, or up to £70 million depending on the use, as identified through high level cost planning). This would include the structural, safety and environmental improvements needed to make the building safe and functional for alternative uses.

#### 6.1.4 Sustainability and the ‘RetroFirst’ agenda

Sheffield City Council declared a climate emergency in 2019 and has set ambitious targets to achieve ‘net zero’ carbon emissions by 2030. That transition will require major change across all parts of the economy, including construction and development.

Construction consumes almost all of the planet’s cement, half of its steel, and one-quarter of its aluminium and plastics. Because of the way it consumes energy and resources, the industry’s carbon emissions are among the highest of all economic activities. This is partly down to a wasteful economic model through which structurally sound buildings are prematurely demolished and replaced with new ones in situations where they could be put to some viable economic use.

There is thus a growing acceptance that demolition should always be considered a ‘last resort’ and all efforts should be taken to retrofit rather than replace buildings whose original use has fallen away. The highly vocal and increasingly influential ‘RetroFirst’ campaign – spearheaded by The Architects’ Journal – champions the principle that the ‘greenest building is the one that already exists’. This was generally understood and acknowledged by almost all of stakeholders we spoke with, most of whom started from the principle that re-use options – if viable and beneficial to the city centre – should be prioritised for the JLB over options that require its removal.

Accepting that refurbishment and re-use should always be the default option, this does not imply that there is never a case for removing a built asset that is no longer fit-for-purpose or that runs the risk of blighting its wider environment. An important reason for the unfortunate ease with which buildings are torn down is the fact that traditional cost/benefit analyses – through which these vital decisions are taken – usually do not account for the ‘whole life’ carbon cost of removing an existing building.

A robust appraisal of options for the JLB should include this assessment of embodied carbon so that informed and defensible decisions can be taken with rigour and transparency.

## 6.2 Options for the JLB

In very simple terms, there are three broad options to consider for the John Lewis Building:

1. Re-use / re-purpose it
2. Remove it
3. Removal with *partial* replacement

We discuss each of these in detail.

### 6.2.1 Re-use proposals and suggestions

A number of re-use options have been considered so far. They are based on:

1. Research into the conversion and re-use of comparable buildings
2. Proposals sent to us directly or sent to the City Council and added to a consolidated list
3. Market research and stakeholder engagement to identify city needs and product/market gaps

A list of proposed or potential uses is shown below in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Proposed or Potential Uses (permanent)**

CATEGORY	USE IDEA
Retail	Smaller retail space for independents/makers Arcade and covered/indoor market Flagship retail/shopping centre Upcycled shopping mall Food Hall
Culture and events	Art gallery Receiving gallery for touring exhibitions/collections Museum (e.g. football museum) Mid-sized music venue Concert hall
Work and Innovation	City centre uses incubator/accelerator Skills training and research centre Fab lab / future of manufacturing Urban/vertical farming Rooftop greenhouse Creative co-working space Conference facility or exhibition/event space
Leisure	'Competitive socialising' Adrenaline sport centre (climbing, skateboarding, parkour) Spa
Civic space	Library and archive 'Story House' Health and wellness services Hospital
Public realm	Extended public realm with events focus Public realm/green space for new city centre residents Play space for children
Accommodation	Hostel/hotel for Peak District users
Education	College/sixth form University student study space

In the current retail climate, with the closure or restructuring of so many stores and department store chains, the repurposing of department stores has become almost a niche asset class in itself. It is increasingly common to see bold announcements of some new project to convert a traditional store into offices, hospitals, university buildings, workspaces, leisure facilities, museums and cultural venues, hotels or mixed-use facilities.

It is worth noting, however, that – for all the hype and fanfare – relatively few of these projects have come to fruition and those that have tend towards the more conventional: a new retail concept or flexible, open plan workspace. Those that have been more imaginatively re-used are mostly in larger markets like London, Edinburgh, Chicago and New York, where there is stronger demand.

While most of the suggested uses above have merit and would add value to the city centre experience in Sheffield, they do not represent an easy and obvious solution for the re-use of the JLB – especially when one factors in the extraordinary cost of refurbishing a large building that is highly problematic from a structural point of view.

### 6.2.2 Removal

For sustainability reasons described above ‘removal’ is not an easy option to consider.

In the midst of a climate emergency, this has to be treated as a ‘last resort’ and subject to a ‘whole life’ analysis of costs and benefits that compares the carbon cost of removal versus its retention.

That notwithstanding, it is not an option to be prematurely discarded for ideological reasons. Extensive engagement with civic leaders and community stakeholders reveals a noticeable preference to clear the city centre of such a large building of relatively little architectural or heritage merit, that detracts more than it adds to the urban environment.

Indeed, while it obviously faces onto Barker’s Pool to frame an important public space, the JLB effectively turns its back to the city on every other side – creating large, blank, inactive façades on Cambridge Street, Burgess and Cross Burgess Street. The JLB causes some of the ‘fragmentation’ that people lament about the city centre – dominating a large site that severs any intuitive link between Peace Gardens, HOCII, Fargate and Barker’s Pool.

To be sure, while there is a widespread appreciation of the public’s attachment to the JLB and the nostalgia it provokes – viz. the extraordinary public response to its closure – we detect even more interest in the opportunities created for the city if the building were not there.

Foremost among these is the possibility of creating a large, prominent park or public space of a scale and significance that – with appropriate design – could be comparable to some of the world’s best urban squares and plazas. Great public spaces – e.g. the High Line, Campus Martius, Las Ramblas, Pioneer Courthouse Square, Place des Spectacles, etc. – can be as emblematic of their cities as iconic architecture. It is not unrealistic for a cleared site at Barker’s Pool to achieve a similar standard, while also providing some of the more prosaic city centre infrastructure that is needed to facilitate wider use (e.g. event space, children’s play, public toilets, cycleways and bike hubs, etc.).



A large public space in this location would also help to stitch together interesting parts of the city that feel disconnected. It would complete the city centre spine that runs from the Moor to Castlegate.

### 6.2.3 Removal and partial replacement

A corollary to removing the building would be to replace it with something else.

Any replacement could occupy a much smaller footprint, thus retaining – and possibly *improving* on – the benefits described in Section 6.2.2.

Key considerations include the following:

1. To remove an existing building only to replace it with a new one further complicates the sustainability arguments raised above. It begs the question: why not refurbish the existing structure instead of tearing it down and starting again?
2. Given public sentiment toward the building and all the nostalgia it embodies, any replacement should have an obviously ‘public’ or ‘civic’ function, at least at ground floor. A large part of the public’s affection for the building stems from the fact that – even outside of any retail function – it was treated as a free and permeable indoor space. To remove this and replace it with ‘exclusive’ uses like residential, offices or hotels would understandably be perceived as the privatisation of what was once a *de facto* public space.
3. A prominent and civic function at ground floor would introduce one or more tenants that could help to programme a large, new public space. A key lesson from great public spaces worldwide is the benefit that comes from having assertive programmers – art galleries, concert halls, libraries, museums, etc. – as anchor tenants, because they can be easily encouraged and incentivised to provide much of the programmable content for the adjacent outdoor spaces.
4. From an urban design perspective, a building of smaller footprint but superlative design would help to frame an impressive public space at the heart of the city centre – an expansion of Barker’s Pool, with City Hall at one end and some new civic space at the other. This would help to cement the benefit of connecting distinctive ‘pockets’ of the city centre.
5. Subject to specialist design input, there is arguably potential to add some height to this part of the city centre. This affords the opportunity to stack more private or commercial uses on top of civic uses to create a more deliverable project and a more sustainable financial model.

Possible replacements of ‘civic’ character are among the proposed re-uses for the JLB (section 6.2.1) and include, amongst others:

- Library, archive and ‘story telling’ centre
- Art gallery
- Museum(s) – including those related to Sheffield’s industrial or sporting heritage
- Concert hall / music venue
- Leisure / sports facility

Any of these could – in isolation or in combination with others – find a ready home in this location, so long as the ultimate design is fit-for-purpose of an appropriate design standard.

### 6.3 Recommendation

A final decision between these options requires more clarity around the actual ‘whole life’ cost of the building’s retention and reuse versus its removal and/or partial replacement.

In the absence of this analysis – which we understand is underway – we can only comment through the lens of broad stakeholder engagement, market research, and our own judgement of how best to improve and ‘future proof’ the city centre experience.

Based on available information, we would – at this stage – recommend Option 3:

1. Remove the existing JLB, including the car park
2. Redevelop and extended Barker’s Pool as a world class public space
3. ‘Frame’ this space with a partial replacement of much smaller footprint and greater height that includes an obviously civic use at ground floor

We do not make this recommendation lightly and we are highly sensitive to its implications, especially from the climate change perspective.

We agree with the RetroFirst agenda and subscribe to the principle that retention and re-use should be the default assumption.

In this case, however, there are multiple factors that – taken together – compromise the re-use option:

1. Even a basic refurbishment to make the building safe and useable for *any* purpose would be extraordinarily expensive and would likely require the City to strip it back to the frame (much of the existing material would not be conserved in any event).
2. An almost like-for-like replacement of retail for retail – even if it were of different character, such as independents, makers, street food, etc. – would almost certainly displace activity from elsewhere in the city centre. Given the extent of current voids and vacancies – notably on Fargate and High Street – there is likely to be an excess supply of retail space in the city centre for the foreseeable future. Creating a new shopping destination in a building as large as JLB would exacerbate the problem.
3. Conversely, its repurposing as anything *other* than retail would likely require such an extensive and costly intervention that it would almost certainly be easier and less expensive to build anew. What’s more, the resulting space would be fully fit-for-purpose rather than adapted to the inflexible conditions of a building that was designed to be a department store.

This is a high level and ‘conceptual’ recommendation that – if implemented – still leaves many important questions unanswered:

1. What kind of public space should this be? What will it include? How will it reconcile the ‘contemplative’ nature of the Cenotaph with the need for arts, cultural and entertainment programming elsewhere?
2. How will it complement and enhance surrounding spaces like Peace Gardens, Fargate and HOCII?
3. How will it support and advance the wider objectives of an emerging plan for the city centre that encompasses objectives around residential, workspace, leisure and cultural uses?

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4. If it does include a civic anchor, what should that be?
5. Through what process will these decisions be taken?
6. Through what channels can the wider public help to inform and influence these decisions?

Resolving these questions will be the focus of work going forward, and subject to strategic decisions informed through a comprehensive process of public engagement.

As stated earlier in this report, it is especially important to note, that we make this recommendation after much stakeholder engagement, but in advance of any widespread engagement with the public. We understand that is likely to happen early in the new year. Given the scale and prominence of the site and its long history of public access, the people of Sheffield should be afforded the opportunity to express opinions and ideas for the site. In our view, however, this public engagement should be contextualised as part of the whole city centre and people should not *presume* the need to retain the existing JLB at all costs. Affection for the building and the nostalgia it embodies may be such that people prefer its retention in any event. Nevertheless, they should have the opportunity to imagine how the site might be used to enhance the city centre if the building were not there. This point is repeated given the importance of the location and what the site has meant to the people of Sheffield over five decades.

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