

Access to York City Centre and implications for York as a Human Rights City

Statement from the York Human Rights City Network

The York Human Rights City Network¹ expresses its disappointment and dismay at the decision taken by the Executive Committee of the City of York Council on 18 November 2021 to make permanent the ban on disabled people using their Blue Badges to access the foot-street areas of the city centre.

York is the UK's first Human Rights City. Its Declaration was celebrated in April 2017 with the full support and participation of all political parties represented on the City of York Council. Since then, the 'York Human Rights City model' has developed a reputation across Europe and beyond for its focus on the human rights prioritised by its residents, its annual Human Rights Indicator Report and its local institutional architecture of a Human Rights and Equalities Board.²

The civil society-based York Human Rights City Network (YHRCN), which holds responsibility for producing the annual Indicator Report, has worked alongside the City of York Council, North Yorkshire Police and other statutory bodies to embrace the Declaration's vision of our city as 'a vibrant, diverse, fair and safe community built on the foundations of universal human rights.' The Declaration talks explicitly about marking 'an ambition', or intent, not a final destination, and of a shared 'commitment to making our vision real.'

In July 2021 YHRCN expressed its deep concerns about the Council's plans in relation to city centre access. In September 2021 the Network brought its concerns to the Human Rights and Equalities Board, which is chaired by the Council's Executive Member for Culture, Leisure and Communities. The Board commissioned the Network to prepare a report reviewing the law and practice and recommending how the Council can best respect the human rights of all when taking complex decisions. The Board also agreed to facilitate attempts to co-design solutions to the access issue, through York CVS.

The Network undertook its commission with speed and seriousness. Its report was delivered on time. It was ultimately ignored by the Council Executive, when making its final decision. YHRCN asked twice for a meeting of the Human Rights and Equalities Board to be held to consider the report the Board had commissioned, and the outcomes of the York CVS-facilitated meetings. These requests were rejected.

¹ York Human Rights City Network (YHRCN) (www.yorkhumanrights.org) is a civil society network hosted jointly by York Centre for Voluntary Service and the Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York. It was instrumental in pushing for the city to adopt its human rights city status. YHRCN is managed by a steering group from which an executive group is drawn. Its role has several parts including (but not limited to) advocacy, networking, running events and facilitating research.

² The Human Rights and Equalities Board (HREB) was established in 2018. It is convened by the City of York Council with the stated aim of engaging the city's statutory and other agencies in the vision of York Human Rights City, providing strategic direction for the council's human rights and equalities work, and tackling issues raised within the York Human Rights City Indicator Report.

As such, the Human Rights and Equalities Board was prevented from taking any position on the access question.

This is a defining moment for York as a human rights city. The Blue Badge access issue is by far the most challenging human rights challenge we have faced since the 2017 declaration. Parts of the human rights infrastructure in the city, built over the last decade, have failed. Specifically, we have serious concerns about a number of aspects of the functioning, leadership and credibility of the Human Rights and Equalities Board and its influence within the Council and wider community.

Secondly, the Council-funded Community Voices project, run by the Network, has also been compromised. Set up to engage groups not reached by normal consultation processes, Community Voices is intended to support marginalised groups to set their own agendas and bring them to the Council and other stakeholders in the city on their own terms. It is a supreme irony that this year Community Voices has worked with disabled people in the city – precisely those ignored by the Council in their recent decision.

The depth of concern in York Human Rights City Network leads it to:

- **express** its dismay at both the process and the substance of the decision the Council Executive has taken.
- **call** for a statement from the Council leadership on what its commitment to York being the UK's first Human Rights City means. Is there an ambition or intent and shared commitment to York being a human rights city, and if so, what does this entail in concrete terms, including in the council's policies and procedures, strategy, and training?
- **call** for an in-depth review of the Human Rights and Equalities Board, its terms of reference, leadership, way of working and role within the Council.
- **call** for a similar review of the Community Voices project, as there is no point in running such a programme if the Council has no intention of listening to the voices and agendas that emerge from disadvantaged groups in the city.
- **offer** its support to York Accessibility Action in its legal challenge to the Council on the access issue; and to the wider disability community in any further campaign to have the current decision overturned.

Issued on 29 November 2021