

Bentham

MASTERPLAN

Initial Findings

February 2023

1. Introduction

1.1 Bentham Masterplan is a joint initiative from Craven District Council in partnership with Bentham Town Council and North Yorkshire County Council.

1.2 Bentham Masterplan aims to produce a plan:

**“For the rejuvenation of the town centre
and to set out a clear vision for the future development of Bentham.”**

1.3 Our aim has been to develop a plan that sets a well-defined path for Bentham to become an economically and environmentally sustainable town. Bentham is a distinctive town. We aim to generate a plan which will build upon what is special about the town. This must meet the aspirations of local stakeholders and be in line with the opportunities available.

A final plan may be able to define a series of projects/interventions – both short-term quick wins and longer-term transformational investments - that can be progressed by local residents with the agreement and support of local authorities and other partners.

Consultation will be essential for the plan to be adopted by the community and businesses so that ultimately, it can succeed. We hope the final plan can be consistent with Craven Plan SP7 Strategy for Bentham and Craven Bentham Preservation Area.

2. Bentham

2.1 Bentham is the second largest settlement in Craven after Skipton. Bentham serves a wide rural hinterland in North Craven, and this elevates its role and function to a Key Service Centre.

Bentham is in the north-west of Craven District, approximately 37km north-west of Skipton and 25km north-east of Lancaster. The town is just over 5km south of the A65. This separation from the strategic road network means that the town is one of the more isolated service centres in North Yorkshire. This has inspired the local often repeated saying:

“All roads lead to Bentham, but there isn’t a good one among them”

The current road network is seriously inhibiting business development in Bentham. The town needs better connectivity to the A65 to the North and to the A683 and the M6 to the West.

- 2.2** Bentham’s population is growing slowly 3,035 (2021 Census) with 57% of the population of working age. Compare this with the populations of some surrounding towns: Ingleton 2,186, Settle 2,714 and Kirkby Lonsdale 1,968. The fact that Bentham’s population is larger than these surrounding towns is not immediately apparent to anyone looking at the town centre as it lacks the retail variety that others have and also feels less inviting.

There has been a significant amount of house building in Bentham in recent years, more than 100 homes were completed in 2020. At the time of writing, planning permission is being decided on over 140 homes across 5 sites around the town. This is attracting new people to the area.

- 2.3** The town lies on the River Wenning, just west of the Yorkshire Dales National Park and on the northern edge of the Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Although set in an area of outstanding landscapes, surrounded by well-known visitor areas, Bentham has a low profile and does not have the pull of other nearby market towns; it is seen by residents as “a solid, quiet working town”.

- 2.4** The development of Bentham can be attributed to a strong tradition of manufacturing allied to its function as a market town. Bentham Auction Mart and Angus Fire, manufacturers of fire safety products, play a major part in the economic activity of the town. Bentham Auction Market has a fine reputation; it is “one of the leading livestock markets in the North of England”. The activities of both are hampered by the poor access roads for road transport.

2.5 Like many small towns, Bentham is undergoing pressure from changes in retail practices nationally, internet shopping and the shifting pattern of employment in the area. However, Bentham has a range of strengths and opportunities including:

- Land allocated for housing and employment development within the Craven Local Plan
- Proximity to Lancaster and the M6, including Lancaster University, which creates new opportunities to increase the number of businesses in the knowledge-based and creative sectors
- Positioned between the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty provides nearby visitor attractions
- Strong local identity with currently a sound economic base
- The town is served by the Leeds-Skipton-Lancaster/Morecambe railway line (also known as the Bentham Line); the station is within walking distance of the town centre. The Leeds-Morecambe Community Rail Partnership (LMCRP) has recently commissioned a study to evaluate the use of the line and its potential development as a trans-Pennine route. In addition, traffic should be greatly enhanced with the opening of a new Eden Project in Morecambe
- High proportion of regular visitors due to three large static caravan/holiday parks and an 18-hole golf course located on the outskirts of the town centre
- There are two Council-owned car parks close to (but relatively inaccessible from) the town centre, providing free short and long-stay parking. In addition, the District Council owns a one-hectare greenfield site on the edge of the study area, which has been identified as having potential to support the development of the town centre.

2.6 However, Bentham is subject to a range of constraints and pressures that are affecting its long-term viability. These include:

- Poor transport links, with travel being car dominated

- Over reliance on two major employers
 - It is relatively unknown outside the immediate vicinity
 - A number of vacant commercial premises within the town centre; these and other premises also need refreshing
 - Retailers still observing half-day closing, including one weekday and Saturday
 - Low level of footfall compared to other comparable settlements with most visits being relatively brief (under one hour)
 - Under-representation of hospitality, leisure and sport services and infrastructure compared to other comparable settlements in Craven District
- 2.7** The effect of increased commuting and a reduction in the number of people being drawn to the town has made its retail sector and function as a local service centre for a wider rural hinterland, vulnerable. Nevertheless, the Bentham Masterplan Team are confident that the character of the town can provide a distinctive offer that will draw people back.

3. Consultation

- 3.1** As Craven District Council were unable to recruit an appropriately qualified outside consultant in Spring 2022, the project stalled. In Autumn 2023 a group of four appropriately qualified local volunteers offered to take the project on (Bentham Masterplan Team). This was agreed in September 2022 by Craven District and Bentham Town Councils.
- 3.2** Local government, Craven District Council, North Yorkshire County Council, or their successor, and Bentham Town Council will need to provide support and specialist help/consultancy to identify the opportunities which can be developed. This will also be needed to support those in the community who have come forward because of the work of the Bentham Masterplan Team and have expressed an interest in helping to bring about change.

The overall objective remains the same

**to set out a clear vision for the future development and rejuvenation of
Bentham.**

3.3 An essential element of the project is to ensure there is extensive, open and inclusive engagement with the local community. Local residents, visitors, local interest groups, existing occupiers, owners and employers together with public sector bodies such as North Yorkshire County Council (the local highway authority) will all need to be included in a well-planned and executed engagement and consultation exercise.

3.4 The consultation with the population of Bentham, visitors, commercial and other interest groups started in October 2022 and ran through until mid-December 2022. It is now complete.

The consultation was achieved by the generation and distribution of two Bentham Masterplan Questionnaires – one for individual responses and a second for groups and businesses.

The **questionnaires for individuals** were distributed as widely as possible to all residents and visitors, using local knowledge and networks to encourage participation.

It was inserted as a flyer in the October issue of Bentham News, which has a circulation of 2,000 and is delivered free to all homes in Bentham.

- Bentham News also gave editorial support with full page features explaining the project and the importance of the questionnaires. This coverage, like the questionnaire itself, featured a QR code for people to complete the questionnaire online if they wished. The QR code linked to Survey Monkey, and this, understandably, was the preferred way of responding for our younger participants.
- Public relations – the Bentham Masterplan team did a Press Release which generated a full-page feature in the Craven Herald and a smaller feature in the Westmorland Gazette both of which included the QR code survey link.
- Public Notices – were displayed throughout the town featuring the QR code to encourage residents and visitors to “Have Your Say”.
- Social Media – Bentham Masterplan and the QR code were featured on a number of Bentham social media sites, specifically Facebook and Instagram.

The **questionnaires for Interest Groups, Clubs, Societies and Faith Groups** were emailed directly to just over 50 organisations – from Age Concern through to Yoga. They were accompanied by an email explaining about the Bentham Masterplan and including the links to the group Survey Monkey site.

Trade and businesses were consulted similarly by email and with the appropriate link to the Survey Monkey site. Twenty-six businesses were consulted in this way.

Local shops and businesses where no email address was available, received a hand-delivered questionnaire with a covering letter. Thirty-two were distributed in this way, from Sweetie Sue's to Audioworks.

For a survey of this kind where a 2% response would have been satisfactory, the results were outstanding. Over 10% of the population replied, underlining the interest Bentham people have in making improvements to their town.

4. Analysis of questionnaire returns

4.1 The method used

The questionnaire returns have provided details of what residents and others like and don't like about Bentham but also suggestions of what changes in the short and longer terms they would like to see. We also know who responded in terms of their gender, age and residence status, whether they live and/or work in the town, are visitors, run businesses and/or are employers.

To make these findings useful as prompts to action the responses have been put into categories to show the pattern of answers to each of the questions asked. As the questionnaire was designed to allow respondents to use their own words this analysis needed replies to be grouped together under common headings, such as

'the town centre appearance', 'the quantity and quality of community facilities', 'problems with the road layout and traffic issues' etc. The headings to be used were based on the answers people gave to the questions asked. All the responses were read as they came in and divided between headings that were adjusted as we went along to try to reflect what people had said. So, headings were added and removed as necessary. As some possible categories such as 'development planning' or 'government funding policy' were rarely if ever mentioned they were not included in the analysis, whereas others, such as 'anti-social behaviours', were added.

To be as accurate as possible without getting overly complicated, all the varied replies had to be placed in a limited number of categories created by grouping issues under inclusive headings. All the individual replies were then entered into a database under these headings, which allowed the following picture to emerge. It should not, however, be assumed that this is anything more than a reasonably accurate depiction of trends and patterns. Using this method of analysis cannot accurately reflect all the differing opinions and views received, but it does give a broad picture based on what respondents wrote. The pie charts are simply intended as an illustrative device to roughly reflect proportions. Where an important issue was raised by only a small number of respondents, we have tried to ensure that headings were flexible enough to include them and where appropriate these will be mentioned in the accompanying text.

4.2 Demographic pattern of respondents

We received 385 completed questionnaires from individuals (4 of whom also replied on the group questionnaire) and a further 40 from organisations, groups and businesses. This represents over 10% of the Bentham population, which is a good response rate for an untargeted survey. However, it does, of course, mean that we cannot be certain that the following analysis precisely reflects the views of the whole population of the town.

4.2.1 Responses from individuals

The individual respondents were 54% female, 39% male, 6.6% unknown. 0.4% other, and the age spread was as follows:

Age group	Percentage
Over 60	47.7%
41 - 60	26.7%
21-40	6.0%
13 -20	2.0%
Under 12	12.1%
Not known	5.5%

4.2.2 Residence pattern

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they lived and/or worked in Bentham or whether they were visitors. The children who kindly responded with the help of staff at the school used the visitor category if they came to the school in Bentham from elsewhere.

Residence etc	Percentage
Live in Bentham	77%
Live and work in Bentham	9%
Work in Bentham	2%
Visitors, including pupils coming from out of town to the school	10%
Not known	2%

Ten of the individual respondents also ran businesses in the town and three were employers.

5. Individual Respondents' views

The following description attempts to record fairly accurately the responses received to each question asked. Inevitably this means there will be some duplication.

Some people considered a particular issue more urgent than did others, so it appears as a response to multiple questions. Some also considered one issue so important that they included it in all their replies and a number chose several concerns in their

response to one question. However, when viewed as a whole we hope it gives a clear picture of the views of all respondents.

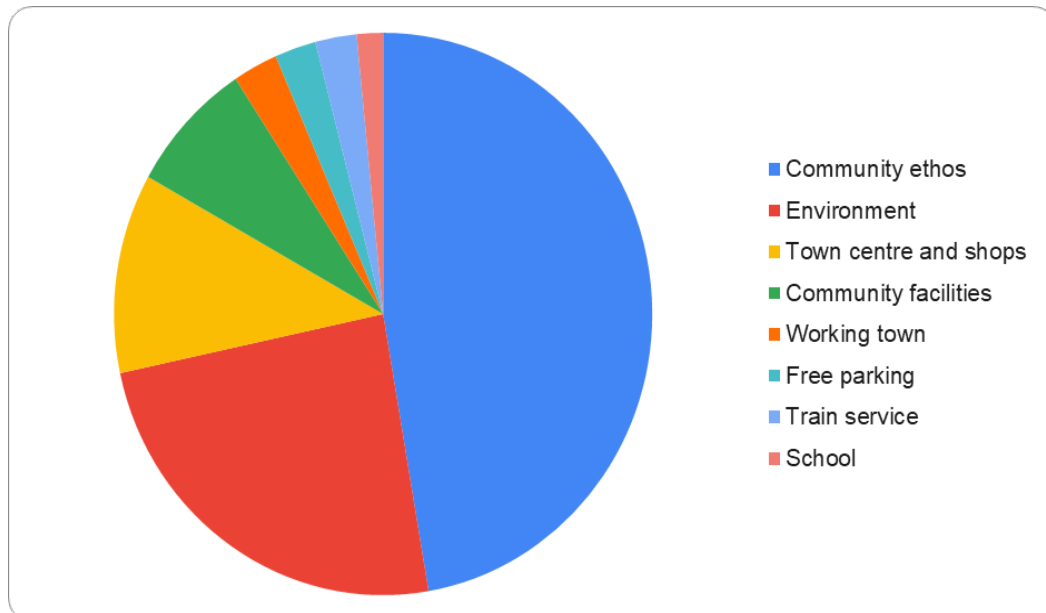
5.1 In your opinion what is the best thing about Bentham?

The pattern of responses was clear.

A significant majority of respondents, almost half, considered that the community ethos, the friendliness and helpfulness of the people was the best thing about Bentham. A further quarter chose the local environment as the best thing. These two headings were therefore considered the best thing by almost three quarters of the respondents.

Smaller numbers recommended the community and town facilities available such as the range of shops, the large number of specialist interest groups, services and organisations. Some of those named included the health centre, library, Pioneer Projects and Bentham News.

Smaller numbers mentioned the benefits of free parking, the good train service and the fact that Bentham remains a working town and has not been taken over by tourism or commuting.



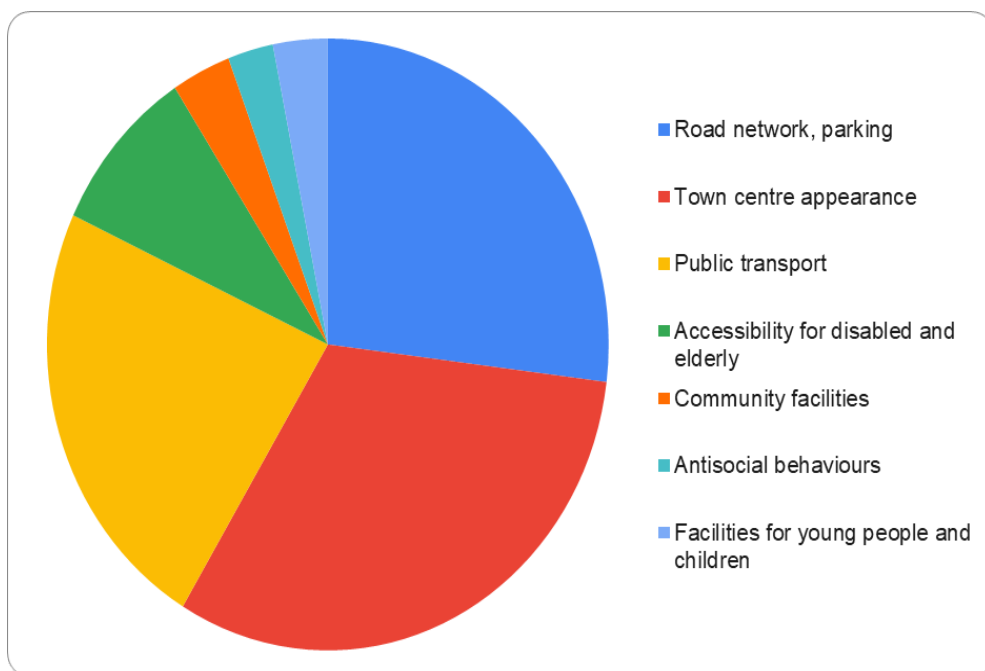
5.2 In your opinion what is the worst thing about Bentham?

Again, there was notable agreement with roughly a third choosing as the worst thing the town centre appearance and another third the roads, traffic congestion and

parking problems. Difficulties with public transport, particularly the lack of a useful bus service, was chosen by another quarter of respondents. Smaller, but still significant numbers, chose

- access issues for those with mobility problems or moving about with babies and children;
- the lack of some essential facilities in the town such as public toilets;
- the poor business environment including the lack of a fast broadband service;
- the lack of facilities for young people and children.

Concern was also expressed about some types of anti-social behaviour, including substance abuse.



5.3. What small thing would make the centre of Bentham better?

Responses grouped around three main suggestions, though not all of them can perhaps really be called 'small'. These were firstly, and not surprisingly perhaps, improvements to the roads, pavements, parking and pedestrian access. Respondents suggested the installation of pedestrian crossings, improving the layout of and access to the car parks, better monitoring and control of speed limits and on-street parking, repair of pavements and traffic calming.

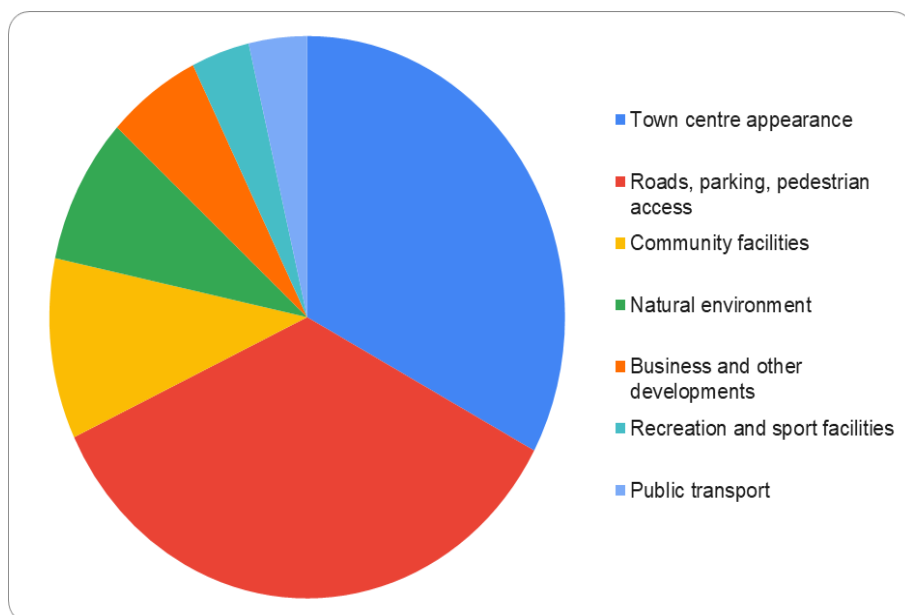
Almost as common were suggestions of improvements to the appearance of the town centre. These included renovation and reuse of empty properties, the revival of a

regular market, support to residents to improve the appearance of houses along Main Street, with the addition of more plants, trees and colour, regular general tidying and removal of litter and dog waste.

The need to replace the bus service to Lancaster was a common concern, including references to the wider impact of the lack of easy access to employment opportunities in local towns and the potential loss of workforce for businesses in Bentham. Already affecting many residents, and frequently mentioned, is the regular need for access to health and other professional services in Lancaster.

The development of new opportunities in new or repurposed buildings was also suggested frequently. This included up-to-date industrial and co-working facilities for the self-employed, free town-wide Wi-Fi, fuller and better use of the Town Hall for events and/or community services and space for arts and crafts enterprises.

Other responses suggested more attention be given to all access issues, especially for people with disabilities and parents and carers accompanied by babies and children where pavements are narrow and uneven. This is seen as especially urgent by many with the recent development of an extra-care facility at Bowland View which houses 100+ new residents in Bentham. Of particular concern also was the need to improve activities and facilities for young people and children, some of which have recently been lost. Regular policing to deter antisocial behaviours of all kinds was also felt to be lacking.



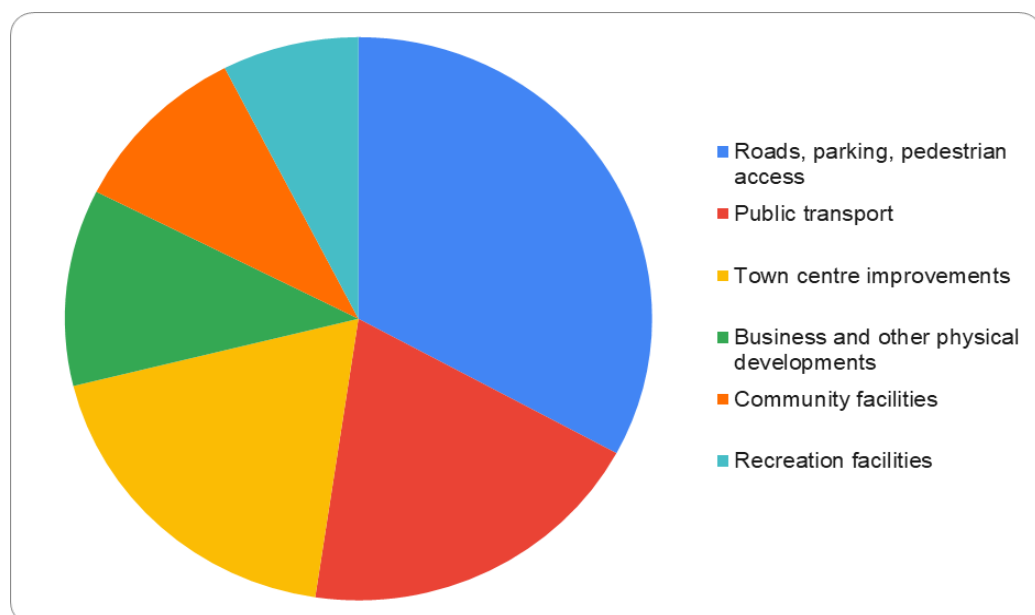
5.4 What one change would you like to see immediately?

The three most frequently selected areas needing immediate improvement are the same as those chosen as 'small improvements'. They are the roads and traffic, the town centre environment and public transport, respondents are clearly aware that these are urgently required.

Many community facilities were thought to need improving or developing. Particularly noted were facilities and activities for children and young people such as after-school clubs, a youth club, better playparks and evening activities for young people. This merged with the requests for more sports facilities, especially a gym and improvements to the playing fields.

Some aspects of the physical infrastructure such as industrial premises, more business and retail premises and the consequent increase in locally based job opportunities was also considered to be urgent. Improving access to the local rural and countryside attractions including better visitor accommodation and facilities, a camp site, visitor information services and notice boards were also highlighted.

Several respondents considered that local government, at all levels, has somewhat neglected Bentham and expressed the hope that this would change quickly, with the Town Council becoming more forward thinking.



5.5 What one change would you like to see over the next 10 years?

Answers to this question were more evenly spread with the most popular being a desire to see the town centre environment improved, followed by improvements to the road network and business environment.

Aspirations in all three areas were many and varied. Hopes for the town centre focussed on improvements to its appearance, an increase in the number and variety of shops and the development of areas for people to congregate and hold town events. Several people mentioned their desire for a town square, more seating and green spaces with plants and trees. More specifically it was hoped that the use of the Town Hall could be widened, to become the community centre, with the suggestion that a manager be appointed to co-ordinate both its use and other areas of the town's development.

It was felt that the traffic problems might be relieved in a variety of ways over the next decade. Suggestions included a partial bypass from the B6480 to opposite Angus Fire, improved access to car parks enabling the banning of parking on Main Street, altering access to the Auction Mart and speed bumps.

Hopes were also expressed for improvements to the business environment including free fast Wi-Fi across the town, encouragement to develop arts and creative industries and co-working space for the self-employed. Making the town more attractive aesthetically was also considered likely to encourage businesses to base themselves in the town.

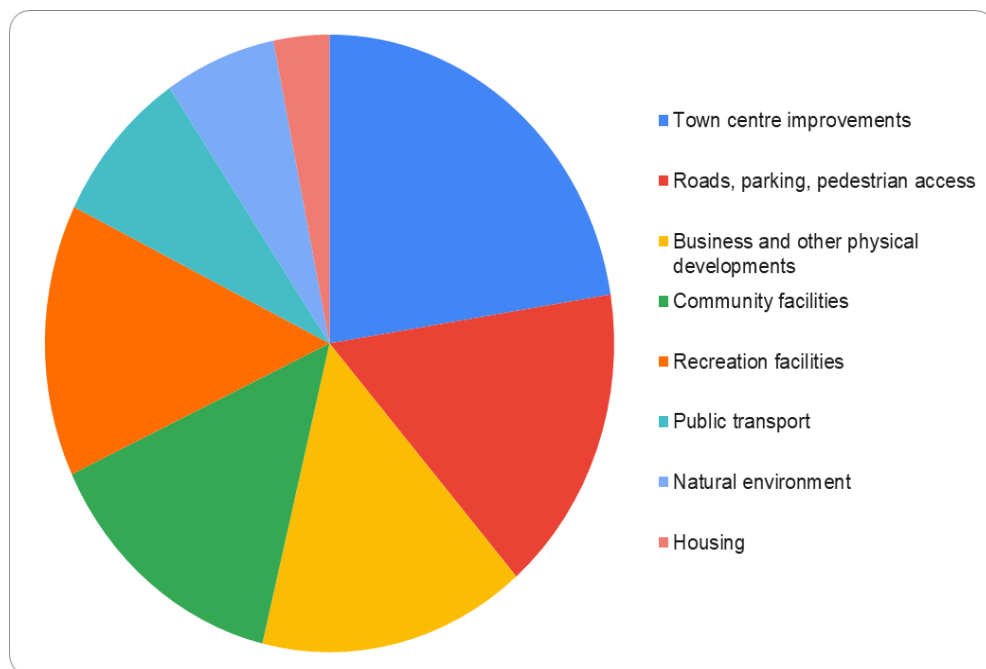
Other respondents wanted to see the development of more sophisticated community facilities such as a sports centre and gym. Also suggested were better public toilets, a youth centre, a museum and a larger and relocated health centre providing more NHS services.

Public transport aspirations focussed on the replacement of the bus service to Lancaster but also included more frequent trains on the Bentham Line and a train 'request halt' at Low Bentham.

Others suggested the town has the capacity to become much more energy self-sufficient with community-controlled electricity generation using the river or wind turbines on the moor.

Many hoped the reliance on the agricultural economy could be maintained at the same time as improving access to the surrounding countryside, encouraged by better mapping and signposting of walking trails, footpaths and cycle routes.

A small but significant number of replies noted hopes for an increase in affordable homes, often combined with a request that further private housing developments be deferred until the basic infrastructure of the town has been improved.



5.6 Any other comments?

Unsurprisingly the comments offered here largely repeated issues raised elsewhere on the questionnaire. In addition, some people offered precise suggestions of the changes they would like to see. All these comments have been recorded and can be accessed but are too numerous to list here. Examples include a cinema, adult

education provision, a meditation space, a digital hub, less dog poo, a pump track and more attention and input from local government authorities at all levels of town, district and county councils.

However, not everyone wanted change and a small number of respondents made comments such as 'I like everything about Bentham' and 'I wouldn't change anything'. One young respondent wrote 'I love Bentham so much I don't think there is anything bad about it'. Hopefully any change brought about because of the Masterplan project will ensure this young person retains this positive view of the town into adulthood.

6 Responses from Groups and Organisations

We received 40 responses from groups and organisations. These included sports clubs, churches, voluntary organisations and public and private service providers and businesses. Many of their answers were very specific to their situation, commenting on the adequacy and accessibility or otherwise of their premises or the availability and cost of alternatives. The total number being small, percentages are less reliable than for the larger number of individual responses. However, some consistencies are obvious.

Responses reiterated the general feeling that the best thing about Bentham is the community ethos, the knowledge that people are mostly willing to help one another and support local businesses and organisations. Several community facilities were especially praised, the library, Pioneer Projects and Bowland View were amongst those named.

The worst thing about the town was felt by these groups to be the roads and parking, and the general sense of dejection in the town centre.

The most urgent improvement to the centre of the town was felt to be tackling the traffic, roads and parking, especially along Main Street. Bentham Auction Mart said that without doubt the most inhibiting factor to their business at the Auction is the road network leading to the town.

Groups and businesses also want to see more shops and other enterprises to provide goods and services locally, so residents do not have to look elsewhere for them, and the town centre would then feel more vibrant. Better access to fast Wi-Fi was also suggested as it would encourage new business developments.

For the longer term the same issues were raised including the need for better public transport and more events and activities in the evenings and weekends.

7 What next?

The questionnaire findings described above show that there are four or five main themes in residents' responses. We now intend to work with Craven/North Yorkshire to refine these. We want to be able to identify two or three issues where work can begin immediately to identify the detail of what needs to be done. This will involve establishing small development groups from amongst those who offered their help in their questionnaire responses. We will be asking them to gather more precise information about what can be achieved quickly and what will need to be deferred for inclusion in the longer, final Masterplan.

We hope and expect that the Town Council will want to offer active participation and forward looking support to this work. We are grateful for the use of the Town Hall for meetings and expect to have more need of this support in the future.

Prepared for further discussions with Craven District Council and Bentham Town Council in February and March 2023 by

Elizabeth Adlington

Shirley Brown

Phil Gerrie

Jim Munday