

DUNDEE CENTRAL WATERFRONT: A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

Dundee Civic Trust



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Encouraging the best

Summary:

There has been much improvement to Dundee's riverside area over the past two decades, with significant new public and commercial buildings erected alongside excellent urban landscaping and public amenities. Seven prominent plots remain empty in the central waterfront area, however, and have done so for decades.

This discussion document by Dundee Civic Trust proposes a new approach to the Central Waterfront Masterplan, focusing strictly on the key plots in this area, and their surrounding roads. The aim is to support Dundee City Council and other interested parties in the development of these empty plots by suggesting alternative uses and a possible funding model that may allow these uses to be brought into the Masterplan area. The proposals include: a new urban primary school to cater for the planned increase in population; a new bus station in close proximity to the rail station and civic amenities; and mixed tenure high density housing development integrated with new landscaping and minor road alterations. These changes will help to create a new "Liveable Neighbourhood" in the heart of our city. We offer these ideas in order to open up fresh dialogue on this vital issue, and we look forward to your response.

Background:

Dundee's central waterfront area has been the subject of significant change over the last two centuries, originally as an expanding dockland that catered for various trades including linen and jute and whale products. It was also home to numerous ship builders. When these businesses closed and the railways arrived in the 19th century, the city started to move away from its waterfront. When Dundee received a major bridge crossing over the Tay river in 1966, much of the docks were filled in to accommodate the necessary road ramps. Along with several new buildings near to the ramps, this development cut off the city from its waterfront.

A visionary masterplan for redeveloping the central waterfront area was published over two decades ago, aiming to reconnect the city centre to the waterfront (see *Dundee Central Waterfront Masterplan 2001-2031*). At that time Dundee Civic Trust took part in the consultations that helped form this proposal. This has resulted in the successful removal of several "blocking" buildings (e.g. Tayside House, Olympia, Hilton Hotel), the addition of new buildings (e.g. new railway station/hotel, V&A Dundee museum, bike hub/café, office block), and a substantial amount of new urban landscaping.

There remain, however, seven undeveloped plots within the masterplan area which have attracted little interest for decades and are now a blight on our city centre. There is little prospect for their development under the existing repayment funding model. Equally, the complex network of roads intersecting the central waterfront area remains a challenge for the city and its citizens as vital key routes for through traffic. It is difficult to see how these can be reduced much further. Nevertheless, we believe that the main issue is not the roads, but the empty sites that make this area so unattractive.

A New Approach to the Central Waterfront Masterplan:

Dundee Civic Trust aims to encourage the highest standards of design in new buildings and regeneration projects in our city, and we believe that the Central Waterfront Masterplan area needs to be re-examined now, to take account of the planning changes that have happened in the city, and beyond it, since the masterplan's inception back in 2001. We also believe that the underlying development funding model for the masterplan needs to be re-examined. The proposals in this document are limited strictly to the masterplan area only, as a pragmatic attempt to move the discussion forward with some new thinking, in relation to the *Dundee Local*

Development Plan review and Our Future City Centre: Dundee Strategic Investment Plan 2050 policies.

Overview:

We suggest that the remaining sites in the central waterfront area should now be repurposed, along with some minor road interventions, to help create truly sustainable living in a new “Liveable Neighbourhood”, right in the heart of the city centre (this may be defined as *an area that is designed to be more people-centred and attractive, improving the overall quality of life for residents and creating a community where people can easily move around, access amenities, and feel a sense of belonging*).

Our vision prioritises new residential development with car use largely limited to the disabled only, high quality architectural design, a mix of housing types and tenures, and an extended green environment which will provide family space for play and leisure. Such a development would add substantially to the city centre population and its regeneration.

The new residential developments must ensure a diversity of tenure and house types that will provide a thriving and resilient waterfront neighbourhood. Residents will face inevitable rising tides in the Tay estuary over the coming decades, so developers must build in resilience, either by allowing floodwater to flow under their buildings with floodable ground floors or provide buildings on stilts.

It will be essential, in order to accompany the residential development proposed here, to provide a new primary school which will serve the new increased population. The city centre already provides, in close proximity, almost everything else needed for a Liveable Neighbourhood.

If a developer wished to include other amenities, these would be welcomed if they contribute to the overall concept of the Liveable

Neighbourhood and do not needlessly replicate existing facilities in the city centre. These could help to activate the ground level of the new housing developments and should be robustly designed.

Given the number of significant new civic developments that have taken place in the City Centre, Cultural Quarter, and the Waterfront Area (e.g. Livehouse, V&A, DCA, Science Centre) since the original Waterfront plan was first conceived, we believe it is also timely to suggest the relocation of the city bus station to a more central site, and in closer proximity to the rail station, so as to provide a new and integrated transport hub.

Now that the large new concert venue, Livehouse, has opened in the old Mecca Bingo Hall, it should be possible to hold the former Slessor Gardens concerts there, to avoid disturbance to the new housing, and to allow the Gardens to be used all year round as a much needed and fully public outdoor leisure facility.

Temporary usage of sites and hoardings:

We propose, in the short term, that while this concept of the Liveable Neighbourhood is being developed and marketed, the existing site hoardings are reconsidered as site boundary markers. They are expensive, ugly and difficult to maintain, being prone to damage and graffiti. Any site boundaries should be created with more active elements, such as temporary shipping containers offering pop-up use by businesses or services, or “live” digital hoardings of civic stature. While sites remain undeveloped, they should be repurposed as temporary public parks/community gardens/allotments – to avoid unsightly site hoardings, and keep the sites activated.

We also would suggest experimenting with the creation of temporary green space for the vacant plot 12, as a riverfront extension, to see if this might work on a plot by plot basis. Expectations would need to be managed

as to the plot’s permanent use by ensuring that it is initially seen as a *temporary* space, with different activities occurring over time. There are good precedents for this approach elsewhere in the UK and abroad.

Road options to improve pedestrian accessibility and liveability: We propose a reduction of the Riverside Esplanade by one lane (already happening with lane closure at office building site, without problem). South Castle Street, Crichton Street and Earl Grey Place would be access-only shared surfaces for the housing and school sites and Slessor Gardens, with priority given to pedestrian use – see Woonerf concept: (<https://citygreen.com/woonerf-street-concept-for-shared-city-spaces/>).

Site proposals:

We have examined the seven remaining empty sites with the central waterfront area (plots 2, 5, 6 (part empty), 10, 11, 12, and 17) in conjunction with aspects of the plan that have already been completed. Our proposal is a strategic one, related to function rather than design, and directly addresses the requirements of the National Planning Framework 4 Spatial Strategy for Dundee Waterfront to “*deliver a high quality, mixed use, locally liveable place, demonstrating resilient waterfront regeneration which anticipates and responds to climate impacts*”.

National Planning Framework 4 for Scotland Dundee Waterfront (p.110) states that the following types of development should be considered as “national developments”:

a) New and/or upgraded buildings for mixed use and/or residential development;

- b) New and/or upgraded buildings for commercial, industrial, business, storage, distribution, research, educational, and/or tourism use;
- c) New and/or upgraded utilities;
- d) New and/or upgraded active and sustainable travel routes;
- e) New and/or upgraded port facilities for vessel berthing and related landside activities including for lay-down, freight handling and marine sector services; and
- f) New and/or upgraded green and blue infrastructure.

The table below provides indicative uses for the current empty sites:

Remaining central waterfront vacant site options
Site 2: Yeaman’s Shore – bus station in proximity to the rail station and city centre venues
Site 5: NW site –housing
Site 6: Remaining SW site – housing
Site 10: NE site – primary school – to serve extensive new city centre housing
Site 11: SE site – housing
Site 12: E Shore site – green extension of Slessor Gardens to enhance the riverside walkway, or key gateway building set within parkland.
Site 17: Apex site – housing



Key

	Residential
	School
	Bus Station
	Building / Park

Alternative Central Waterfront Plan



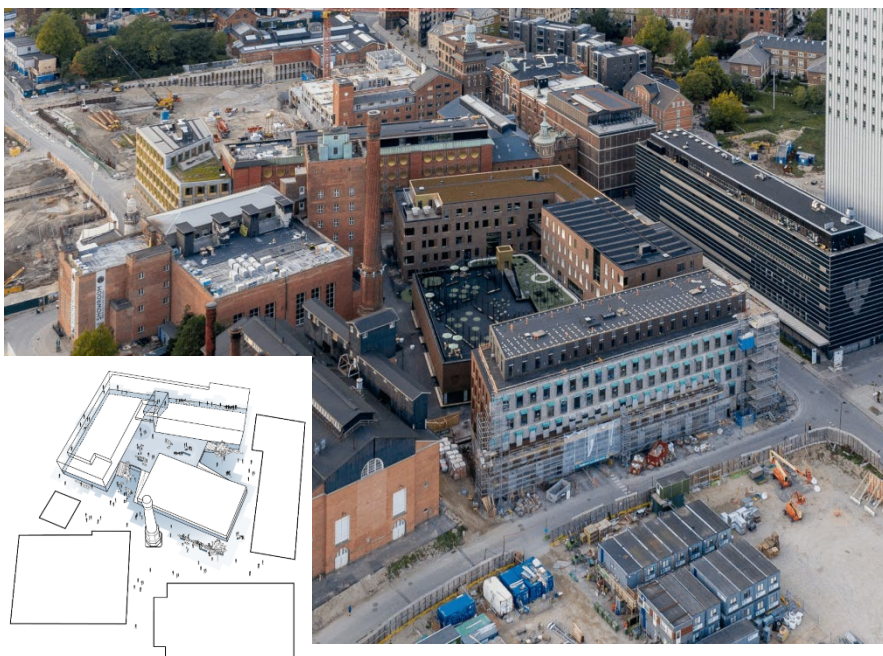
New bus station: The current Dundee bus station is too out of the way from the main centre and its attractions. Co-locating it next to the rail station on Yeaman shore provides seamless public transport facilities with quick access to both the Cultural Quarter and the City Centre. The site would have room for a 10-stance bus station with forward moving buses only and no reversing. Buses could enter from either end of Yeaman Shore, providing Whitehall Crescent and Dock Street become two-way. Car parking would be located above it and housing above both of these levels acting as eyes on the street, in this mixed-use development.

Broadmarsh [Bus Station and Car Park](#), Nottingham



Housing development: Historically, Dundee has had tenement housing development in the city centre. This high density and high population is needed to make local services viable. A good example of low rise/high density development is the [Camden Courtyard development](#). It has a density of 400 dwellings per hectare and a tenure split of 50/50 between market sale and affordable homes. Rather like the Malmaison Hotel building opposite these waterfront sites, the building in the photograph has seven storeys, with the top two storeys cleverly set back from the street elevation to lessen its impact. It also has roof top shared terrace gardens.

New urban housing by Sheppard Robson Architects, London



New primary school: There is an excellent opportunity to create an innovative sustainable high density primary school on Site 10. There are many examples of good design including schools combined with housing [and with rooftop play areas, within high density urban blocks](#) . This would serve the projected new households brought in by much needed new housing development in the city. It could include community facilities, administration and nursery, and teaching-each level with outdoor breakout/play space. The site lends itself to being surrounded by residential housing (combined with Site 11) creating a car free neighbourhood environment. Slessor gardens offers additional green play space.

European School, Copenhagen, Denmark – by Nord Architects



Landscape strategy: Slessor Gardens could be partly hard landscaped over as a proper civic square for outdoor events, with the two adjacent waterfront sites (existing public space and site 12) used for soft/mixed landscaping to make a decent city centre estuary park, which would be the envy of Scotland. Playgrounds, [such as the above](#), provide essential places for play and are necessary for children’s health and development, increasing physical activity levels and stimulating social interaction with other children. Children living near parks with playgrounds have better mental health than those living near parks without playgrounds. We suggest including a playground along the waterfront in site 12, within an extension of Slessor Gardens. This would be in proximity to the existing sand park and water play feature and would serve the new housing proposed as well as the public. [this one not identified]

Underpinning Finance through Housing Development in the City Centre:

We recognise the constraints that the City Council currently operates under in relation to financing the redevelopment of the remaining sites in the central waterfront area, being subject to the Growth Accelerator Model (GAM). This requires a level of commercial development in order to increase rates returns and to repay loans given for the area development. Thus, this model tends to preclude civic and housing development.

Our proposed solution is to cross-finance the development of these sites for public purposes, where necessary, with new housing development at the waterfront or elsewhere in the city using developer contributions via Section 75 planning agreements. This will involve the development of existing brownfield sites and also bringing back to life the many empty buildings within the city centre.

A look above ground floor level around many of the city centre streets indicates a lot of apparently empty space above shops and offices, which make no contribution to the vibrancy of the city. A range of existing and new trends means that the number of empty properties needing new purposes is likely to increase even further. These include: banks, churches, retailers, NHS assets, and empty office blocks.

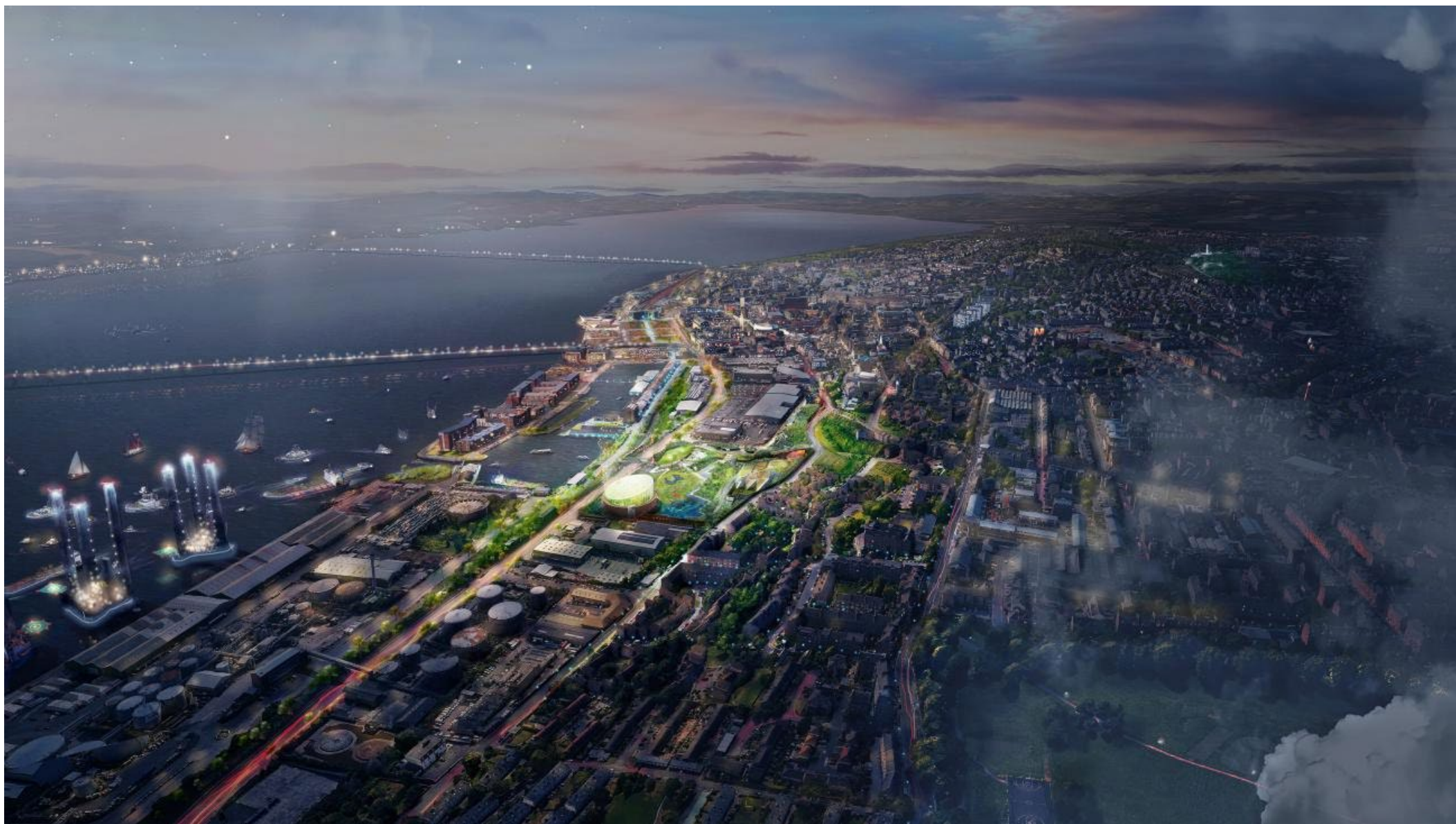
We have initially identified approximately 30 sites that would be available for new housing within the city centre, either via re-use or new build. This amount of development is essential in order for the city centre to become

a “liveable neighbourhood”. The city centre require a [?fairly high [is more certain than “certain”]level of housing density in order to provide the number of households necessary for the viability of services already offered in the city. The present target of inner city housing development set by the City Council (see *Dundee Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2023-2028*) is too low. A more realistic target of 5,000 new homes within the city centre should be set for the coming decade, with a particular emphasis on much needed affordable housing and rental accommodation, given the ongoing housing emergency in Scotland.

One of the solutions to the problem of empty city centre properties is the return of more people - hence more housing of all sorts: students, social, young workers, families, and retirees. There is also a significant lack of high value city centre flats. More visitor/short term apartments would also be welcome. The return of residents and other people will boost both the commercial centre and the night time economy. The recent use of empty space above the Tesco Express in Murraygate for affordable housing by Hillcrest provides a good precedent for this activity.

For any queries about this document, please contact:
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Dundee Civic Trust, June 2025.



Vision of Dundee Waterfront – [Eden Project Dundee](#)

Dundee Civic Trust is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation, established in 1973
For information about Dundee Civic Trust visit our web site at www.dundeecivictrust.co.uk