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BCS comments on BCC's Harbour Place Shaping Strategy Consultation

v4 final, November 2024

General comments

Bristol Civic Society welcomes this consultation. The harbour is a huge asset, in many ways the centrepiece of the city. We all bring our visitors to Bristol here and for many of us it is the focus of our leisure and recreation.

The consultation documents cover a huge amount of information, which is appropriate for a strategy covering a large area over a 20-year horizon. It is useful to share the information with the public at this stage, but the volume of information is overwhelming. There are lots of great ideas and we support almost all of it, but we have some comments of detail.

If we have a criticism it is that it does not do as much as it might to highlight the trade-offs that will need to be struck between different factors, which are sometimes only implicit in the text. On a superficial reading (and with 230 pages, excluding the Atlas, how many readers are going to give it more than a superficial look?), it is easy to conclude that it is all unexceptionable and can be endorsed without comment. But there are instances where different uses will conflict with one another, there is going to be a tension between commercial and non-commercial activity, and between increasing "animation" of the public realm and the equally important need for tranquil public spaces, and underlying everything is the need for the Harbour Authority to seek more income. This last in particular suggests that it may not be easy to strike the right balance between income-generation and over-commercialisation.

The strategy does not cover the feasibility or delivery of the aims and interventions, especially what comes first and how that will be delivered. Is it a 'strategy' or a comprehensive list of aspirations? It's helpful to get agreement on the aspirations first, but we look forward to understanding the initial development plan. There are so many proposed interventions that it's important for the public to get a sense of what the early priorities will be. We accept that the need to eliminate the Harbour Authority revenue deficit will be an early driver.

In connection with which, it would be useful to have been told what percentages of the income come from the various different uses (car parking, moorings etc) in order to assess which of the proposed changes would have a significant, and which a merely marginal effect on the harbour's viability.

And in the context of this financial driver, we are concerned about the absence of any serious discussion in this document of the long term challenges of restoring and maintaining the fabric of the harbour. Maintenance has been skimped since the 1960s, when it ceased to be financed by working docks. There is now 60 years' worth of accumulated work needed: the New Cut bridges require substantial repair to make them safe, the retaining walls need attention (cf the chocolate path collapse), and the Prince St bridge repair cost over-run is another unhappy example of the effects of delayed maintenance. The Council is aware of the backlog, and we understand that a recent consultancy study quantified the cost. But the overall financial position is not clear- if the aspiration is met, of plugging the "revenue deficit" does this include provision for tackling the maintenance backlog? It is unlikely that any of the present or mooted future income streams will be adequate to cover the cost of the work needed. If not, these costs will presumably fall on the Council's general revenue account- either that, or the decay will be tacitly allowed to continue, and accelerate. We would welcome more transparency on the position.

Some of those commenting were not persuaded of the value of many of the marginal questions in the documents. If asked "Could underused harbourside spaces such as at Phoenix Wharf provide much-needed space for community activity" (and there are many similar questions) who is going to say No? So what is the point of asking? If in fact, there is a hidden issue ("Would you like to see X even though it might be at the expense of Y?") the trade-off should be made clear.

We think some of the opportunities with the most potential are at Museum Square, the Grove car park, and Spike Island. Also Redcliffe Wharf, where we await build-out of the consented application. Millennium Square and the Amphitheatre space also feel in need of intervention and activation, but these feel harder to crack.

Comments on the specific documents

Vision

The Vision document seems carefully crafted and covers all the high-level principles, but it takes some diligent reading to come to that conclusion! No doubt this reflects that it has been "*Created by multiple authors and stakeholders, and building on an expansive and far-reaching programme of engagement*". In the introduction, the three main aims (respectively of a social, environmental, and economic nature) are described, and then some tensions/balances between the three aims are described. The vision for each of the 6 places and for the waterspace is articulated, followed by 3 'themes', with associated 'principles'/aspirations'.

Our detailed comments are:

1. The three main aims and the three tensions/balances could be highlighted more (eg bold or larger font) as they are so fundamental
2. We particularly support the 'Openness' aspiration under the 'open and safe' theme of: "*Openness: Space around the harbour, particularly close to the water, will be protected and enhanced to provide a sense of openness and calm within the city, supporting the harbour's important role in providing Bristolians with places that feel free and expansive within the city centre. These will be 'places of no obligation' where people of all ages can feel comfortable resting, exercising, socialising or playing.*"

The need to retain 'places to be' (noting the term 'places of no obligation') is important. Other drivers will increase activity and commercial space, but they must not crowd out the 'places to be'. We think this point could be made more prominent to reflect its importance and to counter the fear of over-commercialisation, and to ensure as far as possible that public space is genuinely public, and not privately owned. In the draft document, it does not feature in the 3 tensions, and the heading 'Openness' does not cover it. It's a crucial element of the Harbour experience and it deserves its own heading.

3. There is a tension/balance between the needs of residents and visitors. This gets references in later documents but not in the three tensions/balances here. There is an overlap here with the point above about 'places to be'. It is not straightforward because many of the visitors are residents of Bristol. Again, this point could be more prominent.

4. We note:

"Car Parking

While the longer term plan anticipates that some of the quayside car parks will be redeveloped, in the short term they are vital – as car parks – to provide income to enable the Harbour Authority manage and maintain the Harbour Estate. Car parks will be retained until market value, development costs, and travel habits have

shifted sufficiently to justify their redevelopment"

As in other places, the Council has a conflict of interest over car park provision. It's a tricky balance. Ideally the Harbour Authority should not be over-reliant on income from car parks, because we should be discouraging private motor traffic from entering the city centre. Not forgetting that parking for disabled visitors is essential, and that visitor attractions will want to make transport access easy and convenient. To balance the comments about access by car, there should be comments in the Vision about access by public transport and active travel. For instance, the crucial role played by the walking routes using the bridges across the New Cut.

5. Identities: The 6 areas of the docks could each have their own brand identities. The wharf names lend themselves naturally to this idea, and reflect the docks' heritage.

6. Toilets: the provision of publicly accessible toilets at reasonable intervals around the harbour walkway needs better consideration. The only zone where the concentration is sufficient is Wapping Wharf at certain times and days. The reality is people urinating against walls or anywhere that they think not under scrutiny at the time. In cash-strapped times, the alternative is the scheme where bars and cafes etc allow non-customers access to toilets, but we are not sure that the scheme is visible enough or as widespread as it needs to be,

Atlas

This is invaluable documentation of the current state, looking at many facets.

Waterspace Plan

1. We support the swimming space at Baltic Wharf in principle, but can the swimming and the sailing etc sit happily alongside each other? The description of intervention *BWW1: Harbour swimming* acknowledges the issue but does not answer it. It would be helpful if feasibility could be confirmed in time for the adopted strategy.

2. We welcome the proposal for a Water Sports Network across 6 sites. It is a bit unclear whether the Network is an organisation or just a loose network. It presumably needs to be managed. The promotion of water sports will generate motor traffic for those that bring their own boats, which needs to be managed. It is also unclear what physical development this might require: could it spill over into a built environment proposal? It's all Conservation Area, and open spaces given a purpose can be quickly repurposed later on.

3. There are reduced opportunities to 'mess around with the boat' to the extent that even simple repairs are discouraged whilst afloat. The Marina boat yard has been an alternative site but that has now been swallowed up by the SS Great Britain/Albion Dockyard enterprise. What's needed are a few sites dedicated to small boat repairs and maintenance. This is part of the traditional harbourside ethos, and without it, there is a risk of a sanitised "Disneyworld" character; and there is a risk that boats will be left in the water to deteriorate, to the detriment of the harbour generally. One site could be the hard standing by Prince Street/Mud Dock crane, and the crane brought back to a serviceable state. Also possibly Redcliffe Wharf, and Avon Wharf.

4. What is also missing is a forward looking plan to entice owners of interesting ships and boats to moor their vessels in Bristol harbour. It has been pointed out that classic or simply interesting vessels often require huge money input, and harbours around the world compete with each other to have the best by offering heavily discounted mooring fees and other inducements. Without a helpful plan, these vessels will sail elsewhere.

Baltic Wharf

1. See comment on the swimming space above.

2. One of the challenges is "Limited seating options along the Baltic Wharf public realm", but this is not addressed in the interventions. This ties in with our comment above about the importance of 'places to be'

3. The comment about re-opening the steam railway applies here too, not just in Wapping Wharf

4. BWP6: Vauxhall Bridge: Far more should be done to recognise the significance of this wide New Cut footbridge to the harbour scene. As a heritage asset, it dates from 1900, initially aimed at tobacco manufacturing interests south of the river, including historical tobacco worker access from the north and its main span is Grade II Listed. It was extended across Cumberland Road traffic in the 1980s. The bridge is currently closed for three years' heavy maintenance at no notice to its users and an immediate drop in takings on the SSGB cross-harbour ferry has been noted; this suggesting a strong desire line existed between say North Street in Southville and the area around Bristol Cathedral. There are strong pedestrian and cycle links to work and school and leisure currently severed to Spike Island Arts, SSGB, and via Avon Crescent to the Nova Scotia area and Clifton, including schools and entertainment centres in Southville.

Spike Island

1. There is a need to recognise the potential for conflict between leisure and industrial use – Albion Yard. Both are important, and we would not want to see the Albion Yard operation feeling forced to move by the pressure of leisure activities. There is already a tension between residential expansion and Albion yard, Rolts shipbuilding etc expressed as "agent of change". Boatbuilding is not the only artisan employment use under threat on Spike Island, with other creatives like Puppet Place complaining of short leases (a common harbour business complaint) and the constant threat of redevelopment for residential use.

2. The comment about re-opening the steam railway applies here too, not just in Wapping Wharf

3. The comment under Baltic Wharf of the importance of the Vauxhall Bridge connection applies here too.

Wapping Wharf

1. We support intervention *WWP1: Museum Square*. It could be a major focal point. It has a big footfall via Gaol Ferry Steps and along the harbourside. It should be prioritised as an intervention. The document narrative could also make the point that the M-Shed and Art Warehouse buildings' ground-floor frontages could be made more open and active.

2. We support intervention "WWP5: Railway Tracks. Improve the public realm and integrate the reopened railway lines to create level surfaces to improve accessibility and safety whilst retaining the industrial and gritty character" This is an important issue and the intervention should apply along all Princes Wharf and Wapping Wharf.

3. We assume that the MV Balmoral will remain at its current mooring but confirmation would be welcome (the map shows it, but it is not within the demarcated area of heritage moorings).

4. One comment received- Distinction needs to be made between Wapping Wharf (plan area) and Princes Wharf outside MShed which is a listed area. p09 and p17 describe the requirement for permanent edge protection along Princes Wharf. This has a long history of debate. The unfenced quay edge is a key part of the listed protection of this area as a mooring for ships in its original form. To date no practicable edge protection has been proposed which allows the movement of the cranes and railway wagons and does not inhibit mooring, the space simply isn't there. (It is also noteworthy that existing

fencing further along Wapping Wharf is simply ignored or used as seating; many sit on the quay wall.)

p13 area WWP2 development by the Buttery will have to consider of the statutory clearances and sighting distances required to operate the Harbour Railway. Likewise the proposed foot crossing (p16) would create significant new risks and is unlikely to be approved by the ORR who have a policy of not permitting new crossings.

'Prettifying' this area risks losing the last surviving area of "gritty industrial landscape"

City and Backs

1 *CBP2: Welsh Back Walkway* is something of a misnomer as the road is open to motor traffic, albeit fairly light and including essential servicing of business (both built environment and water-based). It is a pity that a walkway cannot be provided along the harbourside: is there a reason why there is an exception to everywhere else alongside the harbour?

2 We recognise the accessibility issue of cobble stones, but we would not want to see wholesale removal of traditional cobbles, as these are genuine heritage assets in a Conservation Area. Paths-past may be needed for some. A higher standard of repairs should be imposed on utilities digging up the roads and pavements.

3. We suggest that the strategy could reinstate the proposal for a bridge between King Street and Redcliffe. This opportunity came and went some 15 years ago, and most people will have dismissed the possibility from their mind. But this HPSS document is a list of aspirations over the next 20 years, so why not include it? Since the old proposal for such a bridge came and went, there has been a significant amount of residential development in Redcliffe, which strengthens the case. Maybe it has been ruled out by cost, but then it is not clear that the feasibility (whether cost or other factors) has been assessed for the other proposals in the HPSS documents.

Canon's Marsh

1. *CMC3: Millennium Square Diversification*. This 'intervention' is an aspiration but its delivery may be easier said than done. Its footfall is less than one might expect for an important square close to the city centre, except during events and the spill-out from family visits to *We The Curious*. We note the comment "Exploring opportunities for new commercial activity in the form of a series of pavilions built in the context of existing built assets.", and the associated diagram.

2. *CMC4: Amphitheatre*. This space also has low footfall, except during events. It is a pity that the Lloyd's Bank building (Canon's House) is planned to continue to be for office use. *CMT3: Parking (Canon's House)* refers to "a wider project to refurbish and reuse this prominent harbour building (which includes more greening and active ground floor uses)." We would support active uses.

3. Another area requiring public realm improvement is Canons Road off Anchor Square, behind U Shed. It is an untidy space with parked cars and often with broken glass, an unwelcoming space for pedestrians going along a secondary desire line

4. The proposed ferry link from the Amphitheatre to Wapping Wharf is welcome, but a bridge would do more to encourage day to day footfall in the Canon's Marsh area.

Hotwell Road

No comments