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Bristol Civic Society response to the Western Harbour consultation

November 2024

The Society welcomes this consultation. It is useful to publicize now what the masterplan will cover, taking into account past consultations, and explain the balances it will aim to strike, and to give an opportunity for the community to challenge this prior to the full consultation in spring 2025, and to submit comments based on local knowledge.

We give our comments under the headings of the consultation:

Introduction/what we know so far: The starting point is the 2022 Vision. The Introduction lists the key aims of the Vision – build on its tradition of innovation, embrace freedom and nature, be a distinctive gateway, support a thriving community. (The Vision also has a list of 24 ‘Commitments’.) The Introduction also says: ‘We show on boards 4 to 9 how each of our emerging ideas for the masterplan links back to these aims in the vision’, but this link back does not come through explicitly, perhaps because it is not easy to do.

No doubt the masterplan will also refer back to the Local Plan Review policy DS4, which is the policy on Western Harbour and defines the framework for the masterplan. The Local Plan Review includes Western Harbour under Central Bristol. But Western Harbour is not a central site, and it cannot sustain the sort of development that say Temple Quarter will.

Road alignment: It is explained that “rather than looking at new crossings, we are exploring keeping the main strategic route in its current location”. A distinction can be made between retaining the bridge and retaining the alignment, and these words are perhaps ambiguous. We interpret this to mean that the Plimsoll Bridge would be retained in its current alignment.

The rationale is that “it will minimise disruption, cost and carbon emissions”. There are mixed views in the Society. As the 2019 Arup report showed, the argument for other options is that there is an opportunity to create a low-level structure on a different alignment, incorporating a lift-bridge, that is less intrusive.

The public does not have full information to assess the options. Could refurbishment of the existing bridge be done on the basis of a relatively small number of overnight closures? If not, can the alternative route via Merchants Road bridge cope with the traffic over a long period, and what would be the costs of that disruption? Why not retain the current alignment but build a replacement bridge on a more or less parallel alignment, demolishing the old one only after the new one is ready? This would have the added advantage, if it's low level, of being able to knock down some of the ramps. If the engineering/business case for the other options have been updated since the Arup work, we would like to see that made available before the next stage of consultation on the emerging masterplan.

If the Plimsoll Bridge is retained in its current alignment, it is difficult to see how the road infrastructure can be reduced on the north side of the Basin. On the south side, a reserve route

over Junction Lock Bridge must be retained for when the Plimsoll Bridge is unusable. It was interesting to hear at a drop-in event of the idea of routing southbound traffic heading south from Junction Lock Bridge on the same route as northbound traffic, alongside the Cumberland Basin. This has potential to release land for other uses.

Flood defences: we note from the consultation diagram that the proposed location of flood defences has been further developed since the Council's 2020 flood consultation. Comments that we made on that consultation remain valid and are as follows

We support the proposed tactical approach to delivery, especially the approach of incorporating greening, public realm improvements, walking, cycling and recreational infrastructure into the defences. And we support the suggested ways of designing defences, eg set back from river, terracing, glazing.

An important aspect is possible impacts on specific views, and we think it would be helpful to show some key views. For example, the raised defences at the Knuckle and new defensive walls from there around Brunel's Lock and into the New Cut would have a significant impact on the view towards the Suspension Bridge.

It is important that the masterplan shows the impact of flood defences on specific views.

We understand that the defences may be as much as 1.5m high. At some points these will be very intrusive. It is important that the masterplan includes realistic on-the-ground visualizations and even walk-through videos, We would like to see the detailed scheme as soon as possible. We understand that the WHAG Group has had access to a YouTube explaining the flood mitigation strategy. We ask that that it is published on the Harbour Hopes website.

Connectivity: the consultation diagram shows walking and cycling desire lines. This framing of connecting routes seems somewhat crude. The analysis needs further development work to consider other desire lines, and needs to consider walking and cycling routes separately (even if some routes are shared because of lack of width to enable segregation).

Green space: we note in the consultation diagram and support:

- enhancement of Ashton Meadows as parkland, implying it will not be built on
- the area adjacent to Ashton Meadows along the river towards the Suspension Bridge is outside the red line of this project, and therefore not under consideration for building on, and should also be protected as open space, and as such all this should be indicated in the emerging local plan
- potential new greening along the Harbour and New Cut frontages is noted, and may be welcome but not at the expense of taking up valuable space on already quite narrow routeways, activities along the Harbourside, or the dockland character of the area.

We expect there to be a high quality landscape scheme across the whole area.

New homes: we support the stated masterplan objectives of:

- *ensure that the bonded warehouses are not dominated by the new development*
- *review heritage assets and how the new buildings sit alongside them*

At this stage these are just principles, and we await the masterplan to see if/how these objectives are met.

We seek medium-rise development, with no development taller than the bonded warehouses, with ground floor activation, and investment in enhanced community facilities.

We would like to see a variety of size of homes, type and tenure.

'New homes' is the only section where heritage gets a mention. We have added a new section and feel the masterplan should do the same, since heritage assets cut across all aspects of place making and different land uses.

Heritage

There should be a new section on Heritage. We do not feel that it is being given sufficient priority.

The Local Plan review says "*Proposals will have regard to the area's important heritage assets and respond appropriately to key views and landmarks set out in set out in the relevant Conservation Area Character Appraisals and other supporting policy and guidance.*" The future plan for this area should have the heritage of harbour use as the first reference point for development. The scheme should make the most of the heritage assets. For example:

- the de-silting of Brunel Lock can be achieved relatively easily by recommissioning the sluice gate. This worked until about a decade ago and used to keep the whole lock clear of silt.
- Brunel's Swivel Bridge is capable of turning as its support wheels have been restored to working order. Once the deck is restored and new driving gear installed, the bridge could form a much-needed low-level crossing for pedestrians and dismounted cyclists.
- the Entrance Lock gates were once operated by hydraulic equipment powered by water from Underfall Yard Pumping Station. The hydraulic machines are still in situ on the tongue, in shallow pits under iron plates. By replacing a few plates with laminated glass, these interesting items could be viewed by the public

The masterplanning team has the benefit of a Historic England assessment of the heritage assets. A Civic Society member, Geoff Wallis, has done much detailed work on the individual heritage assets and will be in contact with the project team. See <https://bwhha.wordpress.com/>.

We would also wish to emphasise that this area is part of the urban landscape for the whole city, and this is vital to our post-industrial identity as a city-wide community, a visitor experience for people from Henbury as well as Bordeaux. The public space for residents and visitors alike must retain its dock feel, which adds to the experience and sense of emotional connection with the site that we all deserve. Industrial and landscape heritage are two aspects that exemplify this, there are others (eg sport, play, walking, sun rises and sunsets). This area can play so much more of a part in the richness of our city if the various place-making investments (housing infrastructure, heritage etc.) are well framed.

Vibrant mix of uses: the objectives seem fine, and we await the masterplan proposals, However there needs to be a balance between quality and quantity of activity in this area, this is not the city centre. The need to retain 'places to be' (noting the term 'places of no obligation' in the Harbour Place Shaping Strategy) is important. Other drivers will increase activity and commercial space, but they must not crowd out the places to be. We also note that this area and the neighbouring areas of Hotwells and Spike Island are lacking any community-led cultural and community space.

Ongoing engagement with key stakeholders: we understand that through the WHAG meetings there has been concern about inadequate consultation with adjoining neighbours. The Civic Society is keen that all who are potentially impacted by Western Harbour can contribute to the project as it unfolds. The red line of the scheme has been divisive for local residents on both sides of the water.

We further understand that apart from Riverside Garden Centre there has been no engagement of local business including those located in the CREATE Centre.

Delivery: We understand that more than 90% of the land is owned by the City Council, with a great deal vested as Statutory Harbour Estate. The City Council has the power to determine the delivery mechanism and to ensure that any profits from the investment in this area are used to benefit the local community and the City Council.