

NEW VISIONS FOR THURSO & WICK EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MAY 2013



BACKGROUND

The Highland Council is working to enhance Thurso's and Wick's roles as main economic, cultural and service towns for the wider Caithness & North Sutherland area. The Thurso and Wick Charrettes were held to bring together local people to explore ideas and aspirations for the future and create a new vision for each town. The outcomes from both Charrettes will inform the Main Issues Report for the Caithness & Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) and an Action Programme which will accompany it. This is the first time a Charrette process has been held at this early and formative stage in a Local Development Plan process in Scotland.

To facilitate the Charrette process, a team led by John Thompson & Partners (JTP) and Gillespies were appointed. This was part of the Scottish Government's supported Charrette Mainstreaming Programme, designed to promote innovative ways of involving local people in designing sustainable communities. We acknowledge and thank the community members who participated and those who helped deliver the Charrette processes.

WHAT IS A CHARRETTE?

A Charrette is an interactive design workshop where the public, local design professionals and project consultants work together to develop a vision for a place. A key benefit of this approach is that local residents are involved at an early stage in the design process, heightening awareness of sustainable development issues and informing subsequent decisions on the future of their community.

The Charrette events in Thurso and Wick provided a chance for local people to shape the future of their towns and aimed to reach consensus over preferred and alternative land use strategies to feed into the CaSPlan Main Issues Report.

"I think the main message was that yes, there is a lot of investment coming in the next few years but we need to make sure as a community that we keep making improvements for future generations to come. We have so much to offer up here, let's start shouting about it!"

Councillor Gail Ross, Caithness Civic Leader



PUBLIC WORKSHOP EVENT IN WICK



PUBLIC WORKSHOP EVENT IN THURSO

CHARRETTE PROCESS



THE LAUNCH

The Thurso Charrette was launched on 23 January 2013 and the Wick Charrette was launched on the 24 January 2013, both with an introduction by The Highland Council and with the Project Team in attendance.

Key stakeholders in the future of Thurso and Wick, were invited to join a briefing at the Launch events.

These activities served to publicise the events, as many of those who met with the team agreed to pass on information to colleagues, neighbours and friends.

PUBLICITY

The events were widely advertised in local newspapers and banners, posters and leaflets were also displayed at key locations within the towns.

Meetings were held with members of the local community and key stakeholders.

COMMUNITY ANIMATION

To ensure as wide as possible representation from the local community and key stakeholders at the Charrettes, a structured programme of engagement (community animation) was undertaken prior to the events.

THE CHARRETTE

The Thurso and Wick Charrettes were held over seven days between 20 to 26 February 2013.

Wick Charrette

Members of the Wick community were invited to a series of public workshops on 21 and 23 February 2013. Key issues raised included regeneration in the heart of the town on both sides of the river, investment in the harbour and promoting and investing in Wick as a cultural and heritage visitor destination as part of a wider Caithness offer.

Following the two public workshop days, the Charrette team, led by JTP, Gillespies and The Highland Council, analysed and summarised the outcomes and drew up an illustrated vision for the future, which was reported back to the community on Tuesday 26 February at the Assembly Rooms.

Thurso Charrette

Members of the Thurso community participated in the public workshops on 22 and 23 February 2013 to help develop a new vision for the town. Key issues discussed included the future vitality of the heart of town as a commercial centre, the regeneration and enhancement of the riverside and the western expansion of the town, including space for employment uses related to the growth of Scrabster Harbour. Participants also wanted to see new facilities and services to attract further visitors to Thurso including cultural, heritage and water sports activities.

Following the two public workshop days, the Charrette team and The Highland Council, analysed and summarised the outcomes and drew up an illustrated vision for the future, which was reported back to the community on Wednesday 27 February at the Pentland Hotel.

THE WAY FORWARD

By taking part in the Charrettes, people have helped to shape the future of their towns and the surrounding areas. Public reaction has been positive and the leader article in the John O'Groat Journal (1 March 2013) described project options being selected and refined via "a thoroughly democratic process" and went on, "We believe this gives a mandate for the projects to be taken forward within the new development plans for both towns."

The Highland Council was pleased with the positive response and input from both communities to the events. The outcome of the Charrettes highlight the community's aspirations for the future of Wick and Thurso and in response The Highland Council is considering the establishment of a local team or forum to progress the outcomes of the Charrettes alongside the Local Development Plan.

A NEW VISION FOR WICK

KEY THEMES

The outcomes from the public workshops during the Wick Charrette were analysed by the Charrette team and are summarised below.

1. SUPPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION

Wick is an attractive, historic harbour town set in the stunning lowland landscape of Caithness. However, with the decline of the old industries Wick has suffered with unemployment, population decline, a struggling town centre and deteriorating and empty buildings around the harbour. Participants were positive about development in Wick and were keen to focus on regenerating the town's heart and investing in the harbour to revitalise the local economy and strengthen the local community.

"People are positive about Wick and positive about themselves."

2. CONSERVE AND CELEBRATE LOCAL HERITAGE

Local people are proud of their cultural and built heritage, which includes the herring fishing History, Carnegie Library, Caithness flagstones, Thomas Telford's legacy and the Old Pulteney Distillery. The conservation and promotion of the history and heritage of the town and surrounding area could help create a positive image for the town and attract more visitors.

"This was a town of artisans and craftsmen and that was how the town was built up."



VIEW NORTH ALONG HARBOUR QUAY

3. REGENERATION IN THE HEART OF TOWN

Participants felt that the regeneration of key sites on both sides of the river is vital to keep the heart of the town beating. With the forthcoming relocation of the swimming pool and the library to the new school campus to the south of the town, there is a need and an opportunity to enhance the "experience economy" in the heart of town. This would include sensitive regeneration of the built environment, mixed-uses including residential, creative industry and cultural uses, cafes and restaurants and an accessible, vibrant waterfront. The possibility of creating an urban regeneration trust to hold assets and drive the regeneration process should be considered.

"There is a niche market for the right businesses with the right management."

4. DEVELOPMENT OF THE HARBOUR AND AIRPORT

Participants expressed the desire to attract new industries and create local jobs - the harbour and the airport are key to achieving this. People welcomed the idea of utilising the harbour and airport for the potential of off-shore renewable energy related opportunities.

"The harbour and the airport is the key to the future."



VIEW TO HARBOUR ALONG TELFORD STREET



VIEW NORTH FROM WICK HARBOUR



VIEW TO VICTORIA PLACE FROM WICK HARBOUR BRIDGE

5. TRAINING AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Participants were concerned about future training and employment opportunities locally. The renewable energy industries coming into Wick could help to grow the currently declining population as well as retain and attract young people to the town. Establishing links and relationships between business, including the renewables sector, and local schools is important to ensure that the local workforce is equipped with the appropriate skills and training.

“We’ve got to get our school kids ready to take up the baton!”

6. TRANSPORT AND GETTING AROUND

Wick benefits from being served by buses, a railway station and an airport. However it was felt that improvements to service frequency and timing, especially at the beginning and end of the day, and lower prices would help meet local needs, attract investment and bring more visitors. Participants also wanted to see improvements to pedestrian paths within town including better accessibility for all and investment in continuous coastal paths and inland routes. Opportunities to use the railway for heritage rides between Wick and Thurso could be explored.

“We’ve got a harbour, an airport and a railway - how many towns can say that?”

7. A PLACE TO BE IN CAITHNESS

It was felt that despite the outstanding coastal beauty, richness of the local history, heritage and archaeology, the region of Caithness is undersold and under-promoted. Participants agreed that the growth and regeneration of the town should be linked with that of the wider area. Wick should work to articulate, coordinate and promote its many natural and cultural assets as part of an enhanced offer to visitors across Caithness.

“There are so many things in Caithness visitors leave without ever seeing!”

8. CONTINUING THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

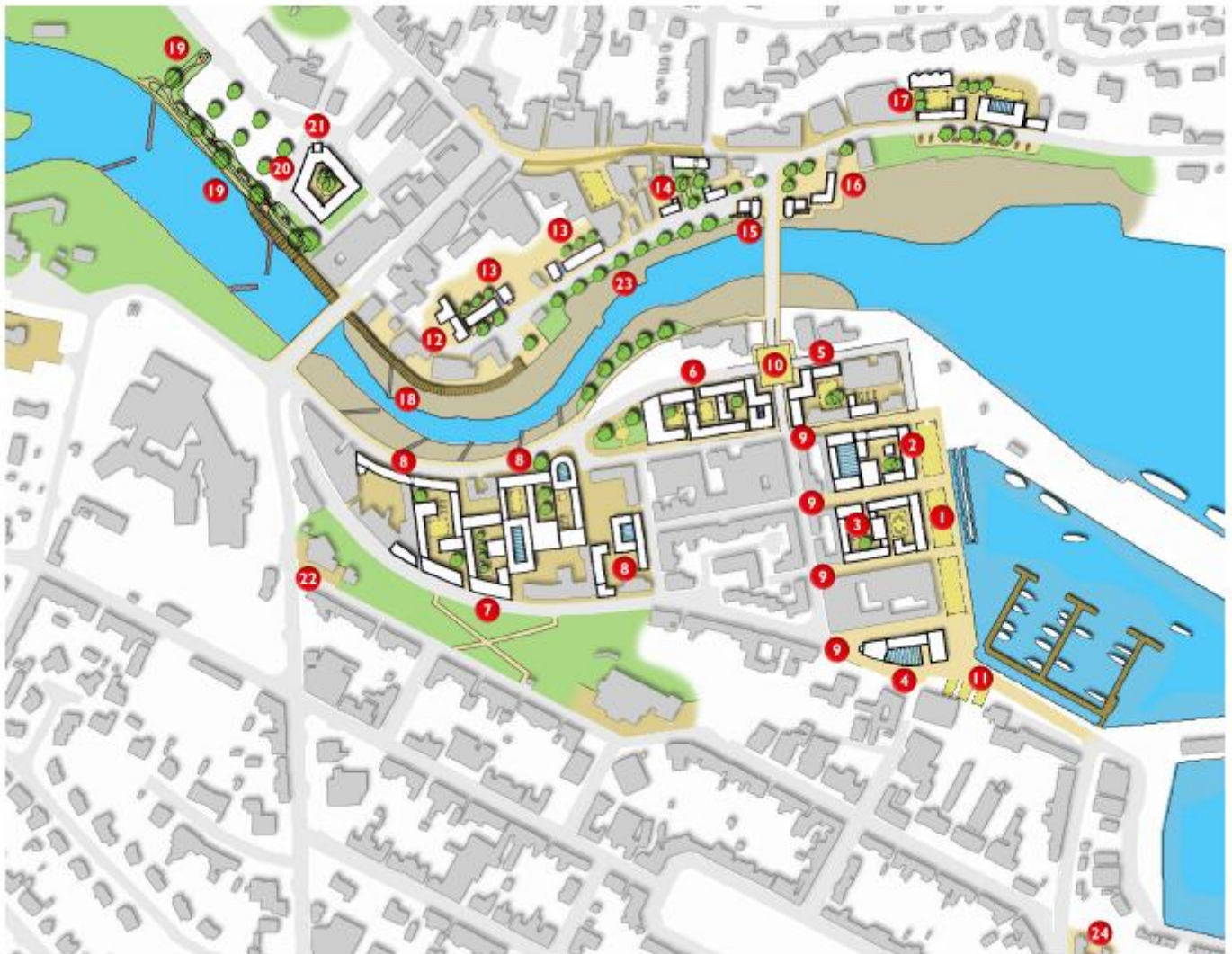
Participants were keen to continue their involvement in the development, regeneration and improvement of Wick. Issues to be considered carefully include preservation and new uses for historic buildings, sites for housing development, area tourism strategy, the involvement of young people and development of the harbour and local economy. In response to this it was suggested that a new or existing forum meet later in the spring with responsibility for discussing how the community and the Local Development Plan will progress the outcomes of the Charrette.

“We need to unite our forces!”

A NEW VISION FOR WICK

ILLUSTRATIVE MASTERPLAN

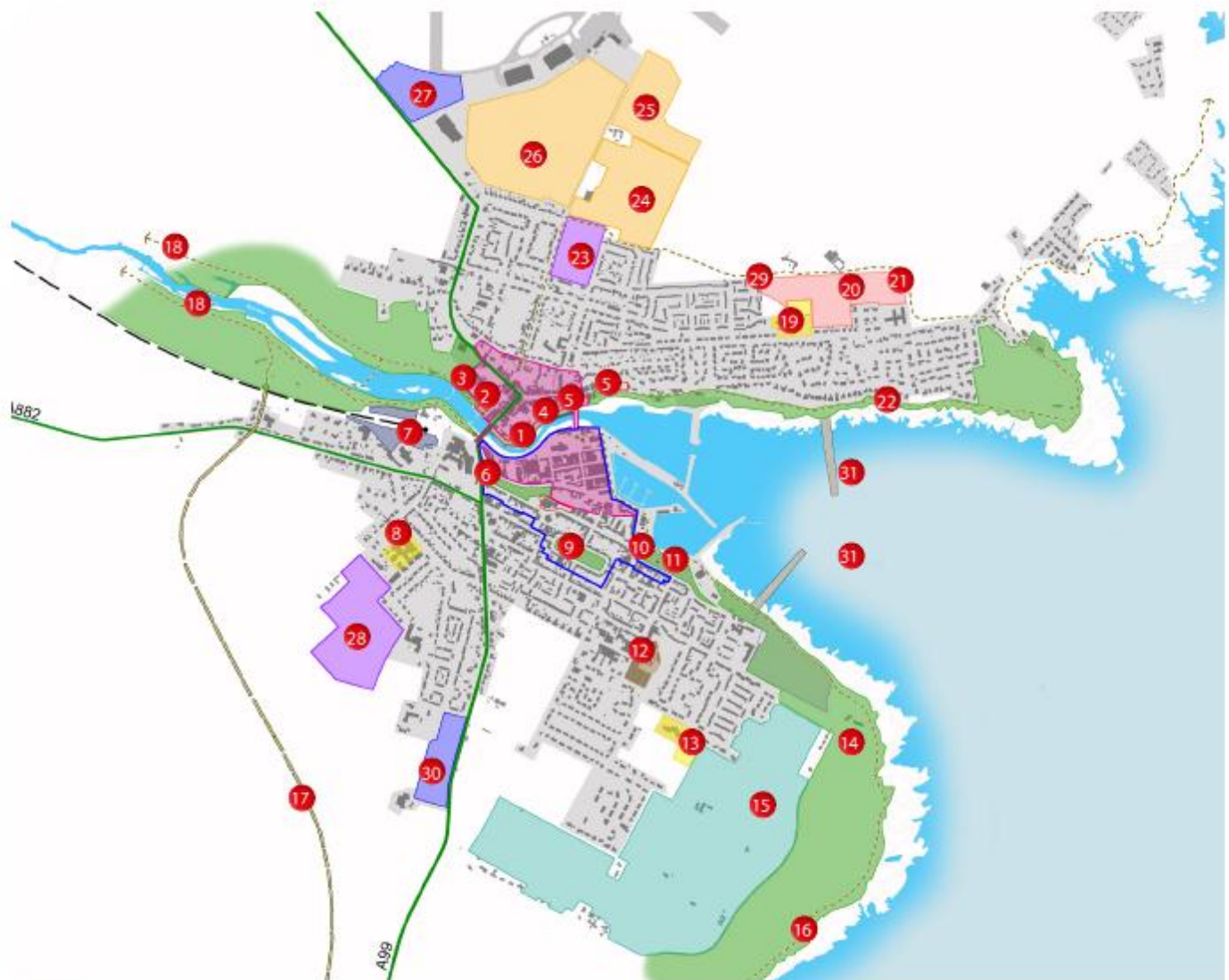
ILLUSTRATIVE INNER TOWN MASTERPLAN



KEY

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 Quayside festival and market space | 17 Hotel/ tourist accommodation in historic conversion |
| 2 Redevelopment for Wick Visual Arts Centre | 18 Riverside walkway with link below Bridge Street |
| 3 Mixed use arts, crafts and leisure redevelopment | 19 New landscaped bund along river edge to mitigate flooding |
| 4 Office development for renewables companies | 20 Retail redevelopment with housing/ offices above |
| 5 Mixed use river view development | 21 Tourist information point |
| 6 Mixed use studio and workshop development | 22 Carnegie Arts Centre with Johnson Collection |
| 7 Residential redevelopment along Union Street | 23 Environmental improvements to Victoria Place |
| 8 Residential live/work and workspace development | 24 Old Bakery refurbished for residential use |
| 9 Eastern pedestrianisation of Lower Pulteneytown | |
| 10 New Pulteneytown arrival square formed | |
| 11 Existing caves redeveloped as retail kiosks | |
| 12 Redevelopment of old police station as a youth hostel | |
| 13 Retail/ leisure infill development overlooking river | |
| 14 Retail/ leisure gap site development connecting to High Street | |
| 15 Tollhouse restaurant/café/ bar with south facing terrace | |
| 16 Retail/ leisure infill development | |

ILLUSTRATIVE WIDER TOWN MASTERPLAN



KEY

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| 1 | Regeneration of historic riverfront buildings | 16 | Improvements to and extension of coastal path |
| 2 | Potential redevelopment of riverfront supermarket site | 17 | Cycle Path along old railway |
| 3 | Extension of green space into town for flood defence | 18 | Extend and improve paths to Loch Watten |
| 4 | Riverfront walkway | 19 | Hillhead Primary School brownfield regeneration site for housing |
| 5 | Riverfront gap site infill to improve river edge | 20 | Potential green belt housing allocation |
| 6 | Carnegies Library potentially redeveloped as Arts Centre | 21 | Pap Broch archaeological park |
| 7 | Railhead development sites for renewables industry | 22 | Improvements to and extension of North Head coastal path |
| 8 | Retention of 1930's facade of school building; brownfield regeneration site for housing | 23 | New Wick North Primary School |
| 9 | Argyle Square environmental improvements | 24 | Wick Airport Business Park expansion site |
| 10 | Bakery regeneration | 25 | Archive site |
| 11 | Pavillion improvements | 26 | Regeneration of Wick Industrial Estate |
| 12 | Pulteney Distillery | 27 | Superstore site |
| 13 | South Primary School regeneration site for housing | 28 | New Wick Community Campus |
| 14 | Amenity landscape preserved along coastline | 29 | New link path route return to town |
| 15 | South Wick future greenfield housing / renewables business expansion area | 30 | Retail park |
| | | 31 | Proposed new breakwaters to expand harbour |

A NEW VISION FOR THURSO

KEY THEMES

The outcomes from the public workshops during the Thurso Charrette were analysed by the Charrette team and are summarised below.

1. SUPPORT FOR GROWTH

Thurso is a beautiful, historic town with a stunning coastal setting and views to Orkney. However, the town is in transition - with the decommissioning of Dounreay the town must attract new investment, including the renewables sector, to secure future training and job opportunities. Providing land for the western expansion of the town will facilitate the growth of Scrabster Harbour and future investment in the town and send out the message that Thurso is open for business.

“We need to be ready for what’s coming if we are to survive Dounreay’s closure.”

2. REINFORCE THE TOWN CENTRE

Participants expressed concern about the potential pressure for ‘out of town’ uses that could accompany the western expansion and it was felt that careful planning would be required to ensure that the town centre commercial and retail offer is not compromised. Local retailers are also competing with the growing internet market and action is needed to strengthen and enhance the town centre as an ‘experience economy’ for both locals and tourists to increase footfall and trade.

“It’s a whole package we’re selling but no one’s going to do it for us!”

3. LOCAL ECONOMY

There is enthusiastic support for encouraging tourism and for new investments in training and employment in the town such as the North Highland College (UHI) and renewables. Participants want to see strong links between the education and employment sector to attract people to the area and ensure the town’s young people are ready to take up new opportunities.

“We’re in the right place and we have the right people.”

4. LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS & TOURISM

A traditional Norse port in the 12th Century, the town is steeped in history and culture. However, it was felt that this rich legacy, and Caithness generally, is under-sold to tourists and that the town should promote these historic and cultural assets through community led events, attractions and tours. Ideas to reopen St. Peter’s Church should be explored along with the use of local crafts, skills, materials and produce.

“Caithness is the undiscovered bit of Scotland!”

5. TRANSPORT & MOVEMENT

Participants highlighted the cost and infrequency of buses and trains as well as the lack of parking at the railway station. There is also concern about HGV’s passing through the town and the location of disabled parking spaces. To improve the vitality of the town centre, it was felt important to work to improve frequency of train and bus provision and improve the arrival experience and parking signage for visitors.

“It takes two hours by car to Inverness and over four by train!”



VIEW LOOKING EAST TO THE RESTORED RIVERSIDE



VIEW TO THE MILLBANK STUDIO WORKSHOPS

6. YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people expressed their desire for better play, sports and outdoor activities, particularly surfing. A key concern was the lack of informal 'hang out' space for 16-25 year olds to get together. Students from the High School highlighted the facilities young people would need in the future to encourage them to stay in the town, including employment, good shops and better housing.

"Establish more links that build relationships with young people and the renewables industry."

7. ARTS & CULTURE

Participants highlighted the number of artistic groups operating in the town and the potential community and tourism related offer that these groups could collectively bring. A cultural centre where artists could meet was seen as important to support a cultural renaissance of the town.

"Art and culture is not just an add on to tourism - it's a really powerful sector."

8. LANDSCAPE & ENVIRONMENT

The River Thurso is one of the town's greatest assets but some of the uses along its length, particularly to the east of the Ellan Bridge, detract from its amenity value. Over time, relocation of employment uses, and replacement by residential and mixed used regeneration, can enhance the river corridor. This would create more natural landscapes and habitats whilst providing amenity for local people and visitors with focused areas for leisure, recreation and culture.

"The river is special upstream and unloved downstream from the bridge."



VIEW UP PRINCES STREET TO MART SITE

9. QUALITY OF DESIGN

Participants expressed concern over the design quality of newer buildings and the neglect, sometimes to the point of demolition, of older buildings. There are opportunities for creative and place sensitive Nordic architectural approaches to new buildings and the enhanced use of local materials, particularly Caithness stone, in future building works.

"We are Norse Scotland."

10. ACTIVE COMMUNITY

Participants highlighted the number of active groups currently operating throughout the town but that the lack of a community hub or meeting space has affected the ability for these groups to co-exist and work together for the greater good of the town.

"We lost our central meeting point when the town hall was turned into Caithness Horizons."

11. CONTINUING PARTICIPATION

The principle of participation was grasped enthusiastically in the Charrette. Participants expressed an enthusiasm to continue their involvement in the town's regeneration and the emerging CaS Plan. Through the Charrette the idea of forming a new forum or team was developed, to build local capacity and enable active community participation for Thurso's people into the future. The group would have responsibility for discussing how the community and the Local Development Plan will progress the outcomes of the Charrette.

"Team Thurso' could be an offshoot from the Community Council."

A NEW VISION FOR THURSO

ILLUSTRATIVE MASTERPLAN

ILLUSTRATIVE WIDER TOWN MASTERPLAN



KEY

- 1 Landscape structure of open margin and planting that extends to settlement edge.
- 2 Landscape treatment to burn for drainage and amenity for residential extension.
- 3 Potential residential and mixed use extension area.
- 4 Proposed Renewables set-down area.
- 5 Cordon secured for possible relief road route
- 6 Community Woodland.
- 7 Woodland edge on higher contour ground around town.
- 8 Thurso River regeneration and enhancement.
- 9 Town centre regeneration as vibrant destination.
- 10 Marine sports and related retail offer at promontory.

ILLUSTRATIVE TOWN CENTRE MASTERPLAN



KEY

- 11 Upgraded coastal path.
- 12 Mart site developed for office use at town side and mixed use behind.
- 13 A Thurso Way footpath to be extended from Mall Walk eventually to Loch More.
- 14 Millbank building group to be recreated as studio workshops with café retail.
- 15 The pond area transformed into ecological park fed by new rills from mill lade.
- 16 Public realm works at the Library frontage.
- 17 Public realm enhancements to transform Sir John's Square and environs.
- 18 Public realm enhancements extended to east and west of High Street.
- 19 Environmental improvements to prominent housing development around Shore St.
- 20 Commercial uses relocated and replaced with some residential and extended park.
- 21 River edge at end of pedestrian Ellan Bridge transformed into landscaped river edge.
- 22 Commercial uses relocated and replaced with some residential and riverside walk.
- 23 Promontory developed as marine sport retail village with new landform for viewing.

CAITHNESS VISION

At the Charrettes, Caithness was characterised as the lowlands beyond the highlands, a beautiful, low-lying and open county with long views, an heroic coastline and a wide range of environmental, heritage and cultural attractions many unknown beyond the county. The local economy is in transition - the decommissioning of Dounreay and decline in other related sectors such as administration, service and hospitality means that the area must develop effective strategies to attract investment and create employment. The new Local Development Plan will play an important role in this, as will the Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership.

Charrette participants wanted to see the assets, skills and energies of Caithness brought together to make the most of the opportunities of the area for the future. There was also comment about the need for Caithness and Sutherland to work together. In both towns, it was evident that people believe that the communities should work together to welcome appropriate investment in the best locations. Although people are very attached to their own town, it is clear that Caithness as a whole weighs heavily in both their identity and loyalty.

Beyond the clear and present focus on economy, jobs and training, investment should focus on improving transport links, and enhancing the environmental and tourism offer. By working together the combined offer will be greater than the sum of the parts.

Caithness is a place apart and every bit as resilient and distinct as the island communities to the north. Inverness is a long way away and participants expressed a desire for the Caithness community to explore ways by which both decision-making and action can be brought to more local levels. Caithnessians want to express their pride in their area and culture and their optimism for its future, welcoming new investment whilst cherishing the local heritage.

Through the development of an integrated plan for Caithness the message will go out that Caithness is on the move and open for business - a great place to live, work, visit and invest.

