

January 2025



Fort William Town Centre Masterplan | Sàr-Phlana Meadhan Baile a' Ghearasdain

Design Team Response Freagairt Sgioba Dealbhaidh



Introduction | Ro-ràdh

This document details the response of the design team to feedback received during community engagement on the Fort William Town Centre Masterplan (the Masterplan). The process of engagement, and the team's response, feed directly into the next steps for the Masterplan's delivery and implementation and how proposals may be taken forward.

In this document, clarification, amendments, or additional proposals have been provided in response to specific comments. There is a focus on areas where negative feedback was received, or concerns were raised, although not exclusively. We recommend you read this in conjunction with the Community Feedback document which provides greater detail on the range of feedback submitted. This can be found at www.highland.gov.uk/fw2040.

The Masterplan is a working document and presents a high-level vision for the town centre rather than containing detailed specifications or plans. All proposals would be subject to further stages of design and consultation e.g. through the planning process before being implemented, at which point further concerns could be raised and addressed.

The commissioning partners for the Masterplan are the Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and the Lochaber Chamber of Commerce. The design team comprises the commissioning partners plus Threesixty Architecture.

Feedback and Response

Fios air ais agus Freagairt



The specific feedback and issues raised which are addressed in this document can be summarised as follows:

- Building ownership
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- Public realm improvements
-
- Access to the waterfront
-
- Transport and travel
-
- Other waterfront developments
-

- Retail businesses
-
- Leisure and cultural facilities
-
- Building reuse and design
-
- Access and greenspace
-
- Funding and timescales

Further details are provided in the following sections and where specific outcomes have been identified these are set out in yellow boxes.

Proposals for buildings in private ownership or with existing tenants

The Masterplan includes proposals for several key buildings and locations in the town which are in private ownership and/or have tenants. These proposals are therefore just suggestions at this stage. A process of collaboration, including permissions and agreement, specifically with those owners would be needed before anything could progress.

The Masterplan is largely illustrative. Its purpose is to set out some ideas and options as to how Fort William town centre could coherently develop.

The hope was that community engagement would reach as many people as possible including those with an interest in specific buildings and locations. It is acknowledged that direct consultation with specific businesses and owners within the High Street could have been undertaken earlier, in particular:

Nevisport

Suggested as a possible location for later living accommodation.

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Go Outdoors / former Tesco Express

Suggested as a foodhall or creative co-working space with roof top growing space. This building was vacant at the start of the Master-planning process.

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Mairi MacIntyre / Ossians Hotel

Suggested as a location for a street level venue, with co-working offices and a rooftop space.

Nevis Centre

Proposed as a location for a new Leisure Centre with the Nevis Centre re-located to the High Street.

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Tesco Metro/former M&Co

In combination with Fort William Library this row of units is suggested as a potential new location for the Nevis Centre. The M&Co units were vacant at the start of the Master-planning process and most have only been filled very recently.

Outcome 1

As part of a process of more extensive community engagement, premises on the High Street were visited during a leaflet campaign and operators invited to the 4-week public exhibition of the Masterplan in the Fort William Library.

The staff/management and/or owners specifically of Nevisport, Go Outdoors, Mairi MacIntyre, Ossians Hotel and the Nevis Centre were also contacted directly to discuss the Masterplan proposals.

Monzie Square and the West Highland Museum

Concerns were raised about the potential impact of public realm improvements to Monzie Square on existing parking spaces for disabled people and access to a parking area used by staff to the rear of the museum. Through discussion the design team were able to explore parallel plans under development to refurbish and expand the museum.

The West Highland Museum is recognised as an important heritage asset and existing 'attractor' within the town, and the expansion plans will enhance the cultural offer around Cameron Square.

The design team have clarified the public realm proposals for Monzie Square, specifically their compatibility with future museum development, and the need to maintain access through the square to the rear of the museum.

A key purpose of the community engagement programme was to make the design team aware of other plans and proposals that may be in various stages of development within the town.



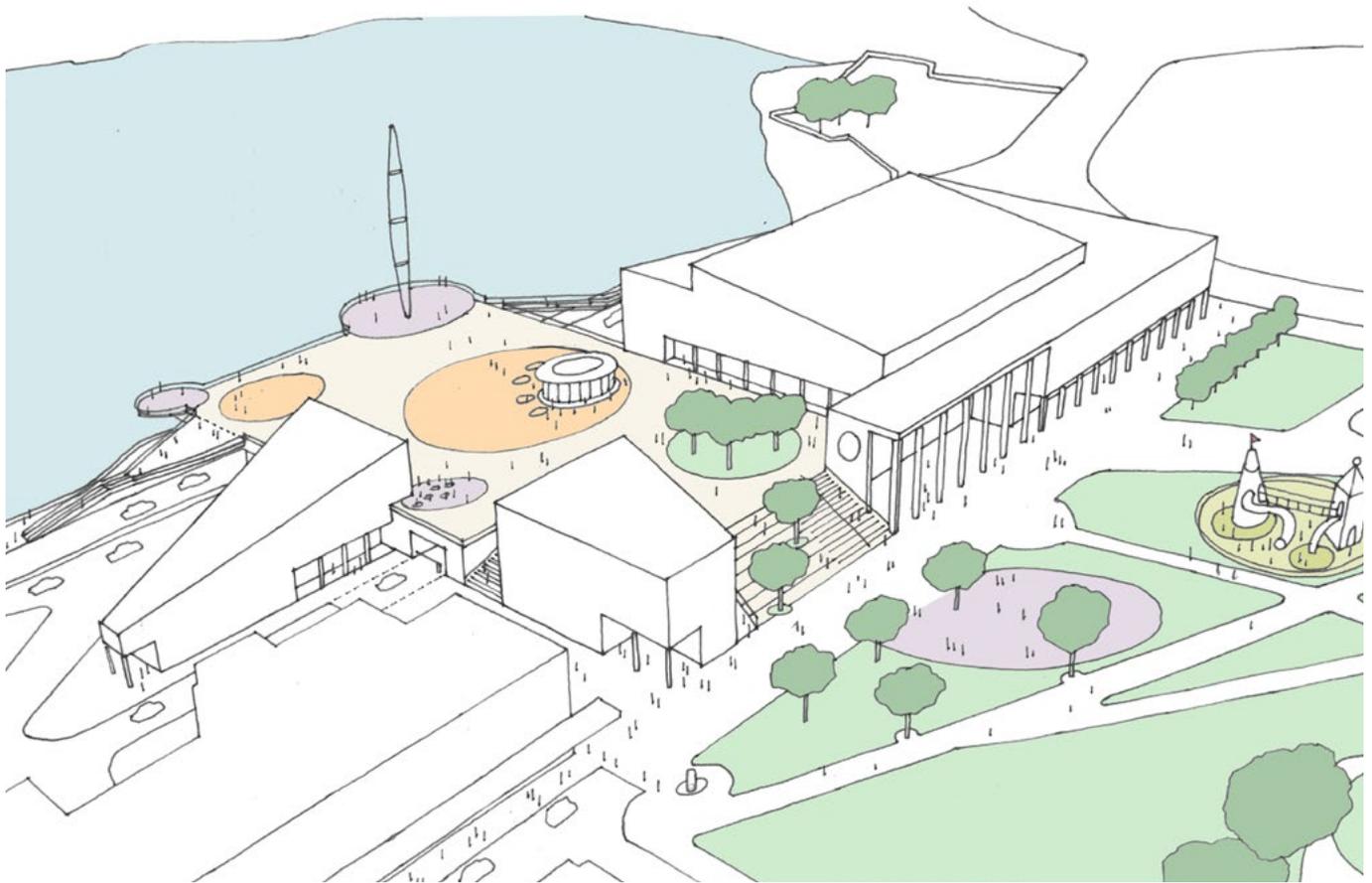
Proposed Museum Redevelopment



Outcome 2

FW2040 will continue to provide a mechanism to help co-ordinate the range of proposed developments within the Town Centre, through sharing information and encouraging partnership and collaboration.

Above: View of proposed rear expansion / improvements to the existing Museum. Any works to Monzie Square will ensure that vehicular access to this area is maintained. Square works could be programmed to only begin once the potential museum expansion / improvements are completed.



Concept sketch incorporating elements from a range of feedback, and showing retention of the A82 as a dual carriageway traversed by an elevated 'plaza' bridging over the road

Alternative ways to alter the barrier the A82 presents to the waterfront

Creating a better connection between the town and the waterfront through greater pedestrian access and developing the loch side has been an aspiration reflected in several previous development schemes. Proposals in the Masterplan for a loch side 'promenade', viewing platform, planting and landscaping and greater access were well received during the community engagement.

However, the related proposal to remove lanes on the dual carriageway raised significant concerns. The negative impact this could have on existing traffic congestion which affects the town was one of the most commented on elements of the Masterplan. Any changes to, or adjacent to the A82, require specific

and detailed transport assessment. Transport and travel focused feedback is addressed in the next section.

Other options for how this better 'connection' could potentially be realised without changing the capacity of the road were suggested by a number of respondents and included bridges or covered tunnels.

Outcome 3

Work to review travel and transport within Fort William is currently underway, a key consideration of which will be the operation of the A82 (see Outcome 4). That work needs to progress before significant options, such as those detailed in the Masterplan which affect the bypass, can be considered.

The original Masterplan proposals plus engagement feedback on alternative suggestions for opening up the waterfront to the High Street will be revisited by the commissioning partners when possible.

The A82, Middle Street, Bus and Rail Station, vehicle movement, parking, and the underpass

All proposals within the Masterplan which have any connection to the A82 and which may alter the flow of traffic around and through the town e.g. changes to Middle Street or a new Bus and Rail Interchange, require close working with Transport Scotland. Proposed lane reductions on the A82 caused concern due to the potential impact on existing road congestion. The removal of the underpass for replacement with a road level ('at grade') crossing was also commented on as the underpass currently provides ease and safety of movement for pedestrians and cyclists under the main road. The potential loss of parking close to the High Street was a concern and the importance of maintaining access for disabled people and deliveries to businesses was highlighted. The potential to include greater improvements to local infrastructure to enable modal shift and support the consistency of public transport journeys was also raised.

Alterations to the A82 detailed within the Masterplan need to be considered in relation to the needs of the transport network and travel aspirations within the wider Fort William settlement, they require detailed assessment and modelling, to establish viability (cost, operation, safety etc.), including consultation with local transport providers. Currently, project partners are in discussions with Transport Scotland to develop an Integrated Transport Plan (ITP) for Fort William as recommended by their Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 which will address many of these issues (see **Outcome 4** for more detail).

Additional transport and travel comments which relate to the wider Fort William area are also explored in the final section of this document and **Outcome 14**.



A82 / Middle Street in town centre context

Outcome 4

Relevant travel and transport proposals detailed in the Masterplan, and the aspirations of the community expressed through feedback, will be considered as part of Transport Scotland's Integrated Transport Plan process. This will include the Bus and Rail Interchange proposals, wider public transport, the bypass and underpass, and active travel. The ITP will identify transport improvement options which address problems and opportunities in Fort William and will consider the interface between the local and strategic road network.

Outcome 5

Other travel-related elements detailed in the Masterplan such as planting to 'soften' the edges between the back of the town and the road, provision of a loch side boardwalk, and lighting or signage improvements to the underpass can be considered relatively independently of progress on the ITP and will be investigated as options for improvements in the short to medium term by the commissioning partners. The overall provision of parking within the town will also be kept under review. Any significant new development would be required to produce an appropriate parking strategy.

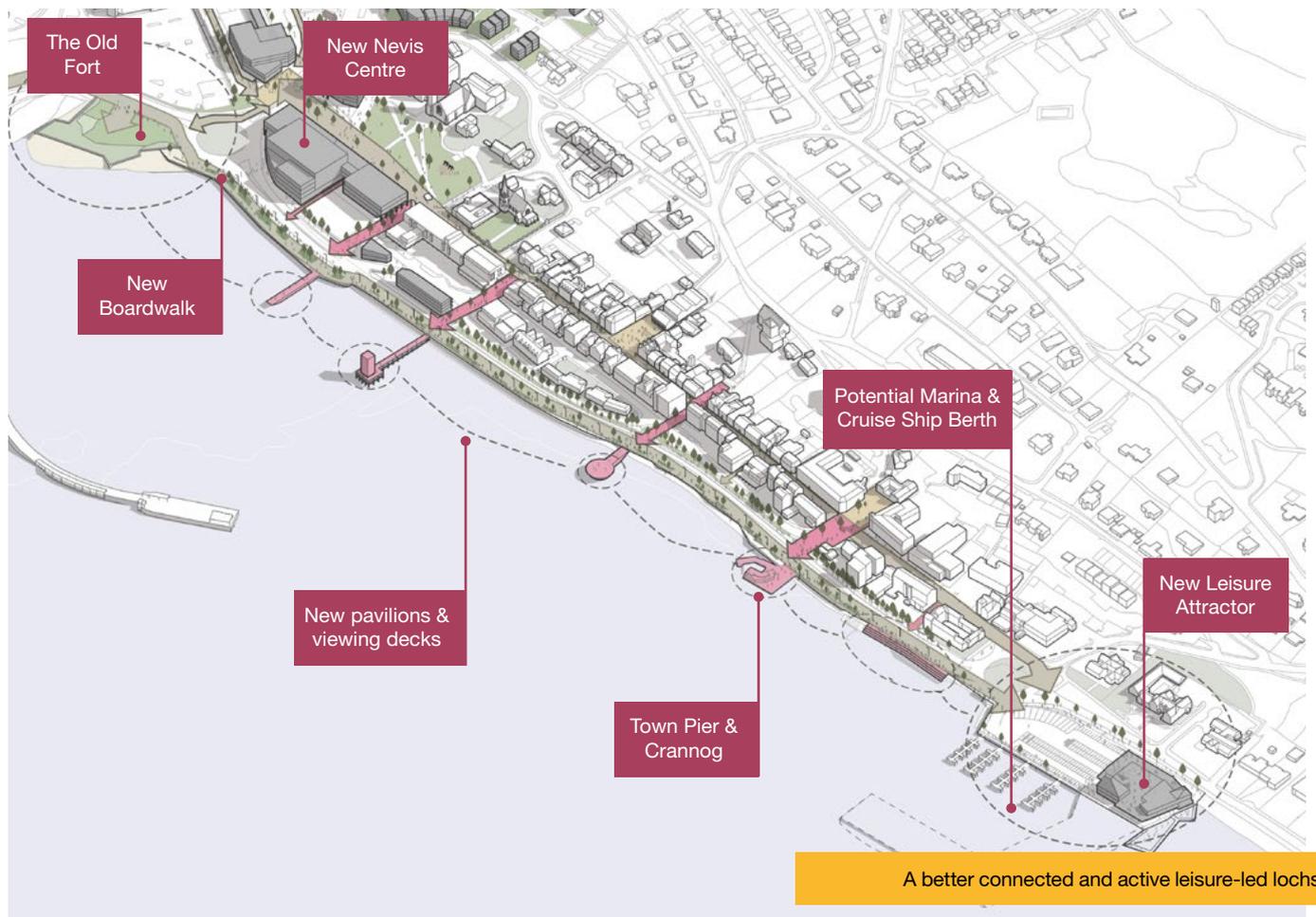
Waterfront proposals

Currently, several water-based businesses operate in Fort William, specifically from the West End Car Park and pontoons, and from Fort William town pier. These businesses have their own development plans, some of which the Masterplan has been able to incorporate.

Outcome 6

Dialogue between the commissioning team and businesses based on the waterfront will be ongoing to try and ensure future developments are complementary.

In principle, proposals which extend access and activities in and around the loch side, are in accordance with the Masterplan vision to improve the connection between the water and the town.



Selection of retail businesses

A key concern highlighted through the community engagement process was the desire for a better selection of shops within the town and less of a concentration on outdoor clothing providers or tourism-orientated businesses. The unattractiveness of vacant shops and the affordability of units was also mentioned.

The commissioning partners are severely restricted in how they can influence who owns premises and who those owners chose to lease these to. However, in developing the

Masterplan and documenting the community feedback, this provides guidance to owners and future owners / operators on the potential and aspiration for a greater range of outlets to occupy Fort William High Street.

There is currently only one unit in the High Street in public ownership - the former Council Service Point and the commissioning partners are considering its future use in light of the Masterplan proposals and feedback (see Outcome 13 for details).

Outcome 7

The option to develop a Town Centre property prospectus for priority sites where there is an opportunity will be explored by the commissioning partners.

Collaboration will also be fostered with the recently established Fort William Business Improvement District (BID) to maximise improvement efforts within the town.

Culture and leisure facilities

Masterplan proposals to expand or create new facilities for leisure, cultural activities and entertainment in the town, and multi-use spaces, were very positively received.

Respondents were also positive about potential co-working and digital nomad spaces. Feedback highlighted a demand for more opportunities for arts and craft working and space for activities orientated towards younger people.



Outcome 8

Building on the proposals detailed in the Masterplan, and the feedback received, the potential to undertake a leisure and culture feasibility study will be explored by FW2040. This would audit existing provision, establish the demands on current services and facilities in the town, and investigate what the recommended configuration of services should be in the future with the incremental steps required to deliver.

Heritage and building design



Block model representations of proposals

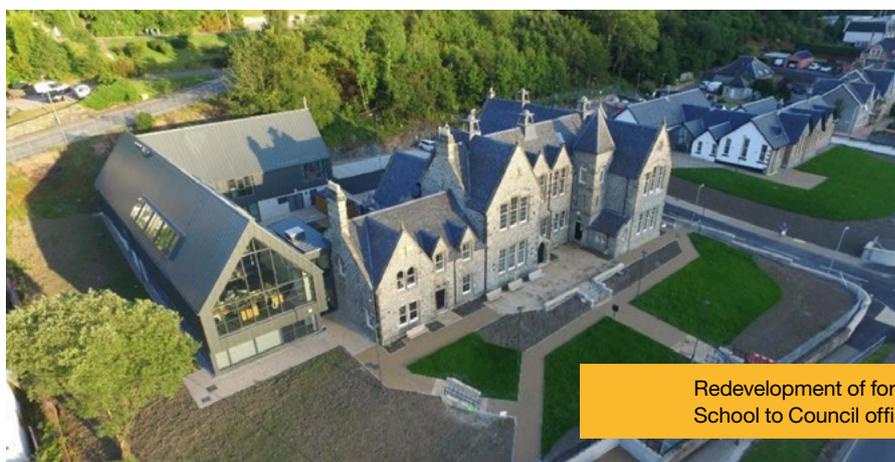
Outcome 9

The 'look' and aesthetics of any new buildings, including the final massing (size and orientation) would be subjected to detailed design and addressed through the planning process.

The Masterplan principally illustrates proposed new buildings as 'block models'. This is ideal for the early stages of design, showing the massing of a building within the context of its surroundings.

This type of model is usually finished in monochrome with stylised trees and landscaping. Several respondents were concerned by the representation of proposals in this manner and about then not appearing to be more sympathetic of the heritage of the town and old buildings.

Respondents highlighted the heritage value of the town and Victorian buildings such as St Andrew's Church (shown below).



Redevelopment of former High School to Council offices

Outcome 10

The opportunity for reusing important heritage as a catalyst for regeneration is acknowledged by the commissioning partners. Where cultural and built heritage can be renovated or restored, as was done when the old High School was redeveloped to provide Highland Council offices, this will be explored.

Greenspace, access and social space

Proposals in the Masterplan for more greenspace and planting throughout the town were well received.

Respondents were generally in favour of new areas of seating and spaces for childrens play in and around the high street, alongside maintaining access for businesses and disabled people. The potential to incorporate more covered space was raised and the provision of youth social space in the town was suggested by old and young. Improved areas for walking, wheeling and cycling were also positively received

Outcome 11

Through FW2040 the suite of proposals in the Masterplan corresponding to public realm improvements, greenspace, access, and play and social space will be investigated to see what it may be possible to progress in the short to medium term (see also **Outcome 5**). This would be done in partnership and consultation e.g., with the Town Team, High Street businesses, the BID, and the local community.



How will this happen? How will it be funded?

Feedback across respondents highlighted concerns about achievability, and how the Masterplan proposals could be funded and delivered.

A key focus for the commissioning partners is how to progress elements within the Masterplan and which proposals to prioritise. Factors include community engagement and stakeholder feedback, site and building ownership, levels of development required, sources of funding, commercial interest etc. Whether better use can be made of existing facilities and elements within the town will also be considered, although in certain situations new development will be the most cost effective and sustainable long-term solution.

Key funding opportunities will come through current and future Government infrastructure programmes. This is in addition to the potential to attract private investment. Most funding schemes are time-restricted with funders requiring a package e.g. match funding. They also usually require detailed feasibility and a business case to be demonstrated to meet eligibility requirements.



Outcome 12

Resources from FW2040 are to be allocated to this work. In the coming months a shortlist of Masterplan proposals to investigate and where possible take through to the feasibility stage will be developed. This work will need to identify funding and ensure continued community engagement. Within the current financial climate efforts will need to be focused, most likely on a selection of key sites and opportunities.

Outcome 13

The following Masterplan elements are being considered for progression and greater detail will be made available when possible. These include: the reconfiguration and potential delivery of new culture and leisure facilities (see Outcome 8), development of the current Belford and former St Mary's school sites for residential/mixed use, leasing of the former Council service point for art, youth and/or co-working space, a new travel interchange at the Bus and Rail Station, and public realm improvements.

Elements outwith the Masterplan and Town Centre

Feedback was also received on other developments and concerns which were not strictly related to proposals contained within the Town Centre Masterplan.

Concerns about traffic and transport and the lack of reliability and resilience in local infrastructure across Fort William was highlighted, including impacts on public transport. The potential for an A82 relief road and/or Caol link road were mentioned as was the desire for dedicated bus lanes to allow for consistency of journey times and multi-modal shifts. These comments will be picked up in the work detailed in **Outcome 4** which will look at the wider Fort William area.

Respondents also stressed the need for delivery of a new Belford Hospital and commented on the lack of available and affordable housing throughout Lochaber. These concerns are connected to elements in the Town Centre Masterplan. For example, a new hospital would allow the release of the current Belford site which is a key development location highlighted in the town. Even if not directly relevant to the Town Centre Masterplan, this feedback is of relevance to the wider FW2040 vision through indicating what is important to members of the community and their aspirations for the wider town.

Outcome 14

The Masterplan was progressed to reflect the National Planning Framework (NPF4) principle of 'town centre first', with uses then accommodated out of town as required.

The commissioning partners are aware of the importance of projects developing in the wider Fort William area and that these may have an impact on the town centre (and vice versa). This wider context will continue to be a consideration as work progresses on the Town Centre Masterplan.

All the feedback received during this process has been documented and will help to inform the work of the commissioning partners on the Masterplan, and also the work of the wider FW2040 project going forward.

Next Steps

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In the coming months, the commissioning partners will endeavour to progress elements of the Masterplan. This will include prioritising proposals (see **Outcome 13**) and planning their delivery and implementation. Information and updates on this process will be provided on the FW2040 pages of the Highland Council website and in Fort William Library. This process will include further community engagement at appropriate stages. However, you can get in touch to discuss the Masterplan at any time and contact details are provided below.

Further Information

Tuilleadh Fiosrachaidh

You can read more about the Fort William Town Centre Masterplan and the FW2040 project at:

Website:

www.highland.gov.uk/fw2040

You can request further information or submit feedback by:

Email to the Regeneration Team:

regeneration@highland.gov.uk

or

Email to the FW2040 Project Manager:

Alison.Martin5@highland.gov.uk

or

Telephone:

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