

A new vision for Thurso





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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’ve got the right time, we’re in the right place and we have the right people. ”



Key Themes

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 and Thurso Castle and its grounds as key visitor attractions 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!”



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.”



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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.”



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.”



Key Themes

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. ”



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ANALYSIS

Understanding the existing context of a place is important before considering options for regeneration and development. The Charrette process starts by looking at the town under a range of subjects. These include the principal buildings, spaces, landmarks, road, paths, flood risk areas and parks. Within the town, the Thurso Conservation Area is identified and listed buildings noted. Development opportunities which The Highland Council have been made aware of are plotted along with indicative proposals from the Development Brief for the designated Western Expansion area of the town. The Charrette is about consulting through an open workshop process to design the best fit for development. From this process, a masterplan emerged for the town of Thurso and its wider area context.

“ We have millions of creative people in the area! ”

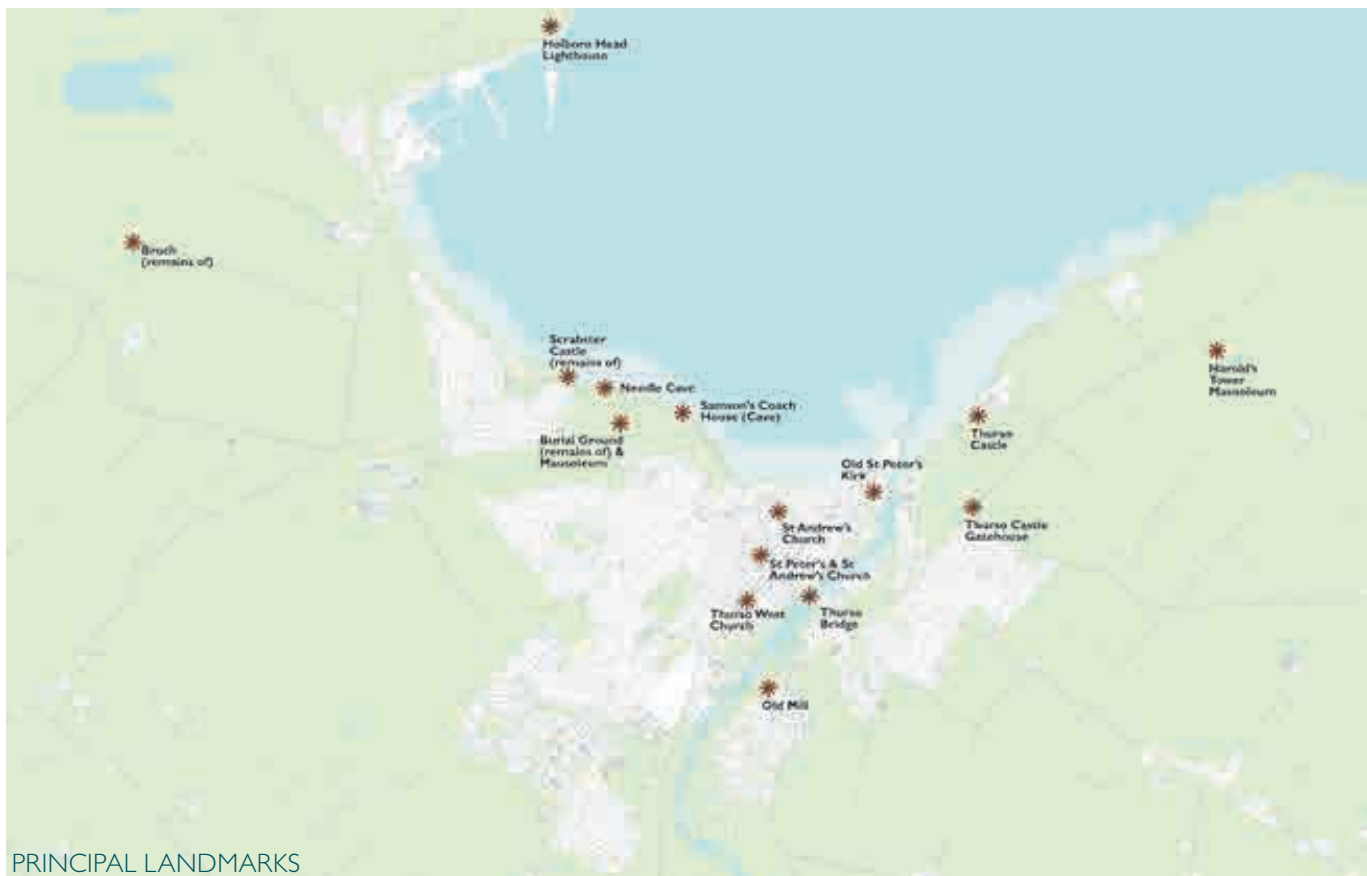


KEY BUILDINGS

Town Analysis



PRINCIPAL SPACES



PRINCIPAL LANDMARKS

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PRINCIPAL ROADS



PRINCIPAL PATHS

Town Analysis



PRINCIPAL FLOOD RISK AREA (INDICATIVE)

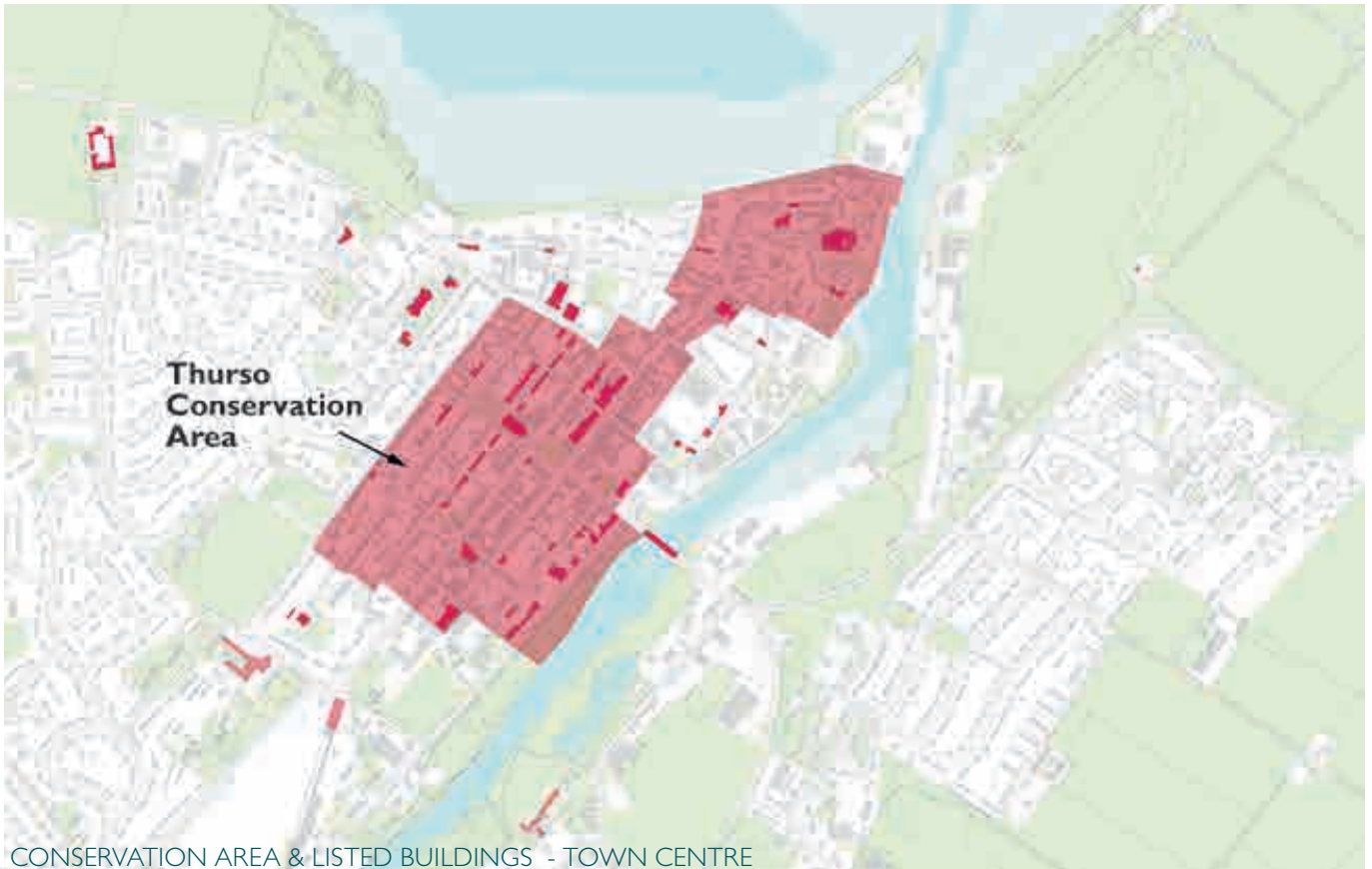


PRINCIPAL GREEN SPACES

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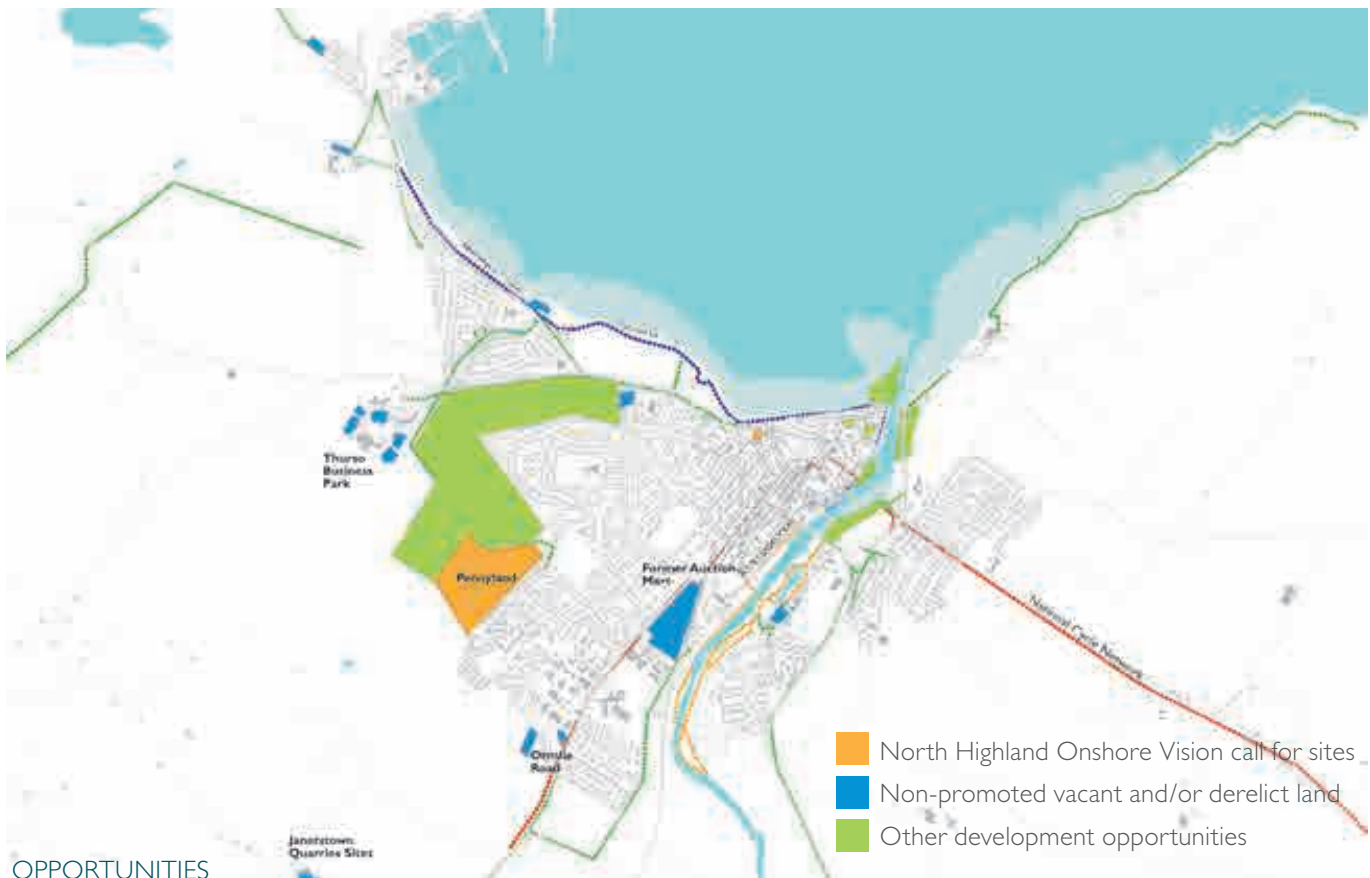


CONSERVATION AREA & LISTED BUILDINGS



CONSERVATION AREA & LISTED BUILDINGS - TOWN CENTRE

Town Analysis



OPPORTUNITIES



THC WESTERN EXPANSION DEVELOPMENT BRIEF

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ILLUSTRATIVE WHOLE TOWN MASTERPLAN



Overall Strategy



WHOLE 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

THE WHOLE TOWN MASTERPLAN

Thurso has been described as Britain's most northerly city. This accolade acknowledges that Thurso has many of the components of a regional urban centre. It also has a mediaeval core and historic site of pilgrimage, a "new town" with a rational grid of orthogonal street pattern, a river harbour from former fishing and stone export industries, a beach, river frontage, railway station, fine civic and public buildings.

A key issue to emerge from the Charrette was that the town centre needs to be supported to ensure its future vitality as the commercial centre for north Caithness. A second issue was the importance of the Thurso River to the town - and the town to the river. The river is a great asset that can be further developed for leisure, recreation and amenity, from the countryside to the sea. The third area that was explored in the Charrette was the proposal for an expansion of the town to the west. Employment uses related to the growth of the alternative power generating industries is related to Scrabster Harbour. Investment in this location would also lend itself to town expansion for residential and some mixed-use development.

The overall strategy for Thurso has been shaped around these three distinct areas and the related opportunities. The town centre (and river mouth **10**) are discussed further in the report. The several possible interventions to the edge of town and western expansion area are described next.

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WESTERN EXPANSION AND TOWN PERIPHERY

Several components comprise the masterplan for the Western Expansion and town periphery. The design of the new elements must stitch together with the existing urban fabric of existing development and recognise opportunities that can arise from topography and a larger scale of urban design.

Working from the Thurso Bay out to the countryside, the wider masterplan starts with the designated open amenity area at the cliff top that bounds the A9 to the north. It is considered that this land should remain open as part of the setting of the town, aspect and prospect, and as part of the open aspect to Thurso Bay as the town is approached from the west. It is proposed that a landscape structure of open green space and tree planting can continue along the road westwards, maintaining some definition to the existing residential areas. **1** The photomontage show in the future this could provide an open roadside area for visual amenity and footpath connection with some tree screening to new development beyond. Where the road crosses the Wolf Burn, the broad landscape feature would turn south and follow the course of the burn. This would be an attractive natural landscape **2** with a Sustainable Urban Drainage Scheme (suds) integrated into the environment as small ponds and swales that can provide habitats and amenity value to a connecting public footpath. This designed landscape would weave between the existing business park and current edge of development to provide a framework within which new pockets of residential and mixed use development (including business and community uses) could be placed. **3** The pocket or defined development area at the northern end could be both residential and mixed use, given the proximity to the town centre and the fine northerly views across the existing open amenity land. Uses such as a hotel would be a good fit for this area with some other mixed uses to serve future residential development further into this pocket.



Today



Tomorrow



Future

Overall Strategy



The Wolf Burn



View from the south towards Scrabster



A view looking to the southeast towards the existing Business Park



View looking west along the A836 across the junction for Janetstown



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The land of Scrabster Mains has previously been allocated for industrial uses, has relevant Planning Consent and is now an Enterprise Area, providing opportunities in particular for the renewable power generation sector. It is proposed that the site to the south would also be set aside for any future extension to this land use or for other business use. **4** Between the residential expansion areas and the allocated land for the renewables storage and construction would be a cordon that would be protected as the route for an A9 relief road. **5** Heavy traffic generated by Scrabster Harbour and the renewables industry areas would be able to avoid passing through the centre of town. This secured cordon would extend from Scrabster Mains around the south of Thurso to the north of the golf



Aerial View over Scrabster Harbour and the western Thurso area



Scrabster Harbour



Unloading lorry at Scrabster Harbour

Overall Strategy

NEW COMMUNITY WOODLANDS

course to connect with the A9 to the east of the river. A Community Woodland use for current agricultural land is proposed for several fields to the west of the town. **6** Being promoted by local landowners, the woodland could be managed as a community asset by the Forestry Commission for Scotland. There could be a car park and a small orientation centre, eco trails with interpretation and compatible recreation uses including cycling. The concept of the community woodland could be extended from the western fields (where it would be centered) to form a linear forest that could eventually enclose the outer reaches of the town. **7** Thurso sits down into a natural coastal basin inshore of the bay. The contours rise gradually to form a defined ridge line around the town environs. This higher ground with an extended community woodland ring around the town, would provide a new visual containment and landscape definition to Thurso.



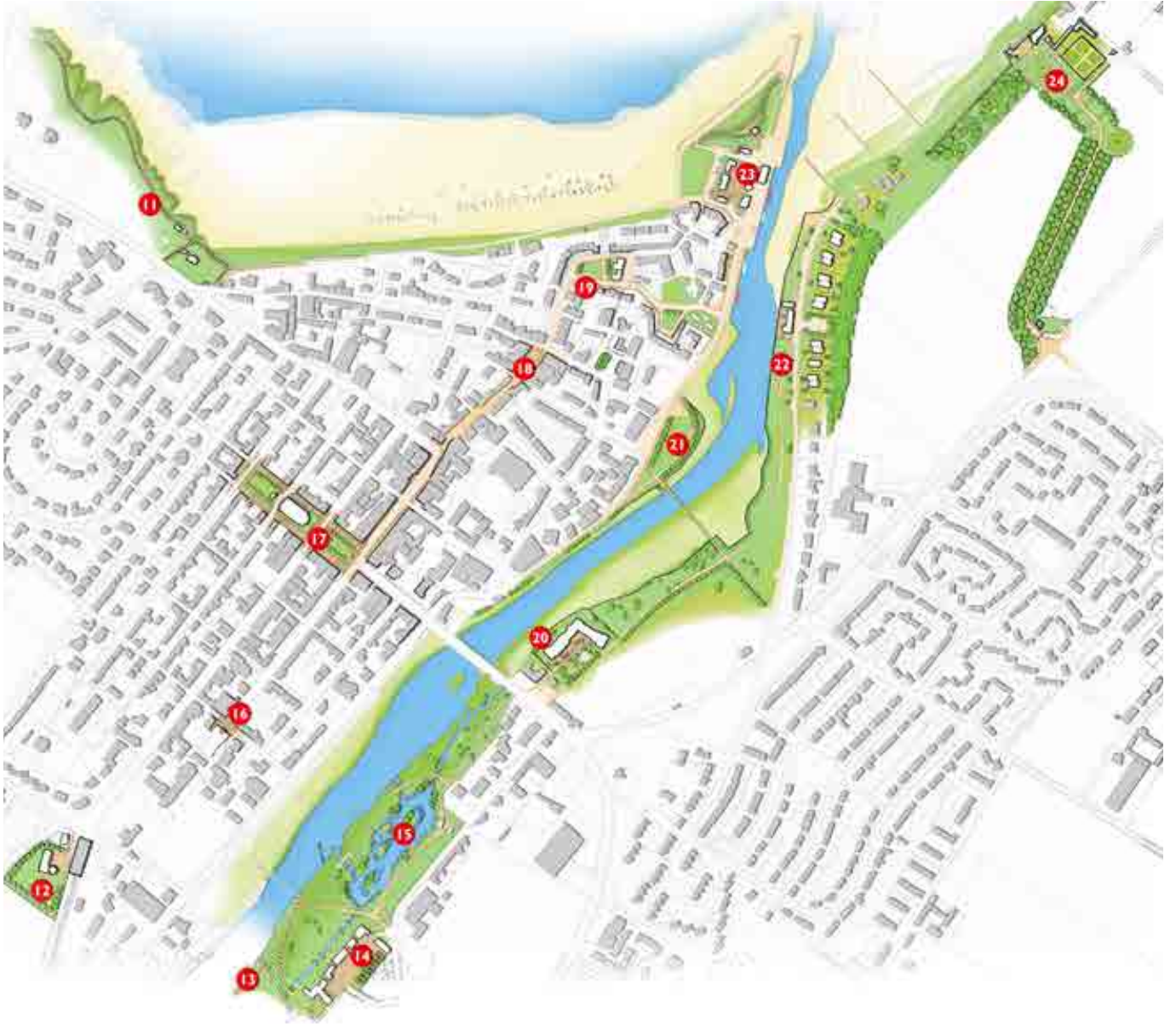
Today



Tomorrow

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ILLUSTRATIVE TOWN CENTRE MASTERPLAN



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.
- 24 Restored gardens as community project, reinstated floodlighting.
(Please note: private property, currently no public access.)

THE TOWN CENTRE MASTERPLAN

The town centre masterplan focuses on the areas mentioned previously under 8, 9 and 10 relating to the historic town and the river and the river connection to the sea. It is a concentrated area of much interest and fine urban qualities. The coastal settlement within the sheltered bay at the mouth of the river is the reason why Thurso was established, grew and thrived. These big landscape elements of river and coast are fine assets that provide a distinct identity to the place. The existing coastal path from the beach to the west is attractive with distant sea views to Orkney and immediate landward fields enclosed in vertical slabs of Caithness flagstone. The masterplan proposes that this coastal footpath is upgraded and made safe. 11



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SOUTHERN RIVER BANK AND MART SITE



There are masterplan proposals for sites at the southern end of the wider town centre and on both banks of the river.

At the south western end of Princes Street is Thurso railway station and a triangular area called the Mart site which has been the subject of planning applications for retail use. **12** The site has a pronounced slope as part of the river valley. Such sites would more naturally tend to be suitable for smaller plots that can fit into the contours rather than larger development platforms that work against the topography. The masterplan proposes a mixed-use designation for the site with an office development that could lend some presence to the site when viewed from the town centre up Princes Street.

The great amenity value of the Thurso River upstream of the road bridge has been recognised with the opening up of the Mall Walk as a well surfaced public footpath and pedestrian bridge to provide a pleasant loop. It is proposed that this footpath should be incrementally extended upstream into the countryside **13**, possibly eventually connecting to the river source at Loch More and the Caithness flow country.

The plan identifies the Millbank building cluster as a site for cultural, leisure and studio workshop development **14** adjacent to the river and a boating pond that would be renewed as an ecological asset. **15** These projects are described and illustrated in the following pages.



The Mart Site

MART SITE



Vision for Princes Street and Mart site

The historic new town plan of Thurso laid out by the Sinclairs, creates long street vistas, some of which are deliberately terminated by public buildings such as the public library (formerly the school) and the imposing church façade on the Bridge approach to the town. With the possibility of office use for part of the Mart site emerging from the Charrette, it is proposed that such development could be located at the corner of

the site adjacent to the station and allow the larger site behind to be subsequently developed for mixed use. This corner site use could provide an opportunity for a vertical building element to be positioned on the axis of Princes Street as a “vista stopper” and thereby acknowledge the connection of the site back into the grid of the historic town.



View of St. Peter's Church from Thurso Bridge



The Public Library

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MILLBANK BUILDING GROUP



Vision of the Millbank Studio Workshops



View of the existing derelict Millbank buildings

Town Centre Strategy

The Millbank buildings **14** are a group of buildings in a very contrasting state of repair and use. This ranges from buildings that are in use, to those that are empty, derelict and in a state of partial demolition with only half height walls remaining. As in many such historic sites which contain functional watermill structures and other waterpower related industrial buildings, the Millbank group has a very positive quality and charm. The Mill Theatre is a great asset for Thurso and an important anchor for future repair and transformational development of the site. The sketch illustrates how studio workshops, cafes and other synergetic uses could create a special enclave for the arts, crafts dining or leisure. Some live/work units could provide residential animation to the scene which would focus internally around a hard landscaped court within the setting of the riverside park.



Millbank buildings from the western river bank



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BOATING POND TRANSFORMED INTO ECOLOGICAL PARK



Current view of the boating pond east of the river



Vision of transformed pond area

Town Centre Strategy

The area around the boating pond **15** has a cluster of leisure and sports recreation facilities. This area can be strengthened through further investment in these sectors. Environmental improvements to the area of the boating pond and the adjacent park boundaries to the road would enhance the area, making it more attractive to residents and visitors.

Boating ponds used to be a very popular pastime and many such ponds were created in municipal parks. This popularity has waned and while there may be a short summer season in which rowing boats or pedalos still appear on ponds, for most of the year boating ponds offer much less than what a body of water could contribute to the environment as an ecological asset.

It is therefore proposed that the boating pond is transformed into an eco-park with a naturalised treatment to the landscape of the water's edge with reed beds and water tolerant plants, shrubs and trees. Such species would also be able to cope with flood events that inundate the pond area. The colonisation of the pond edges with native indigenous plant species for this sort of environment will provide habitats for other wildlife and create visual and educational interest. The photomontage illustrates how the park could be transformed and made an attraction in itself.



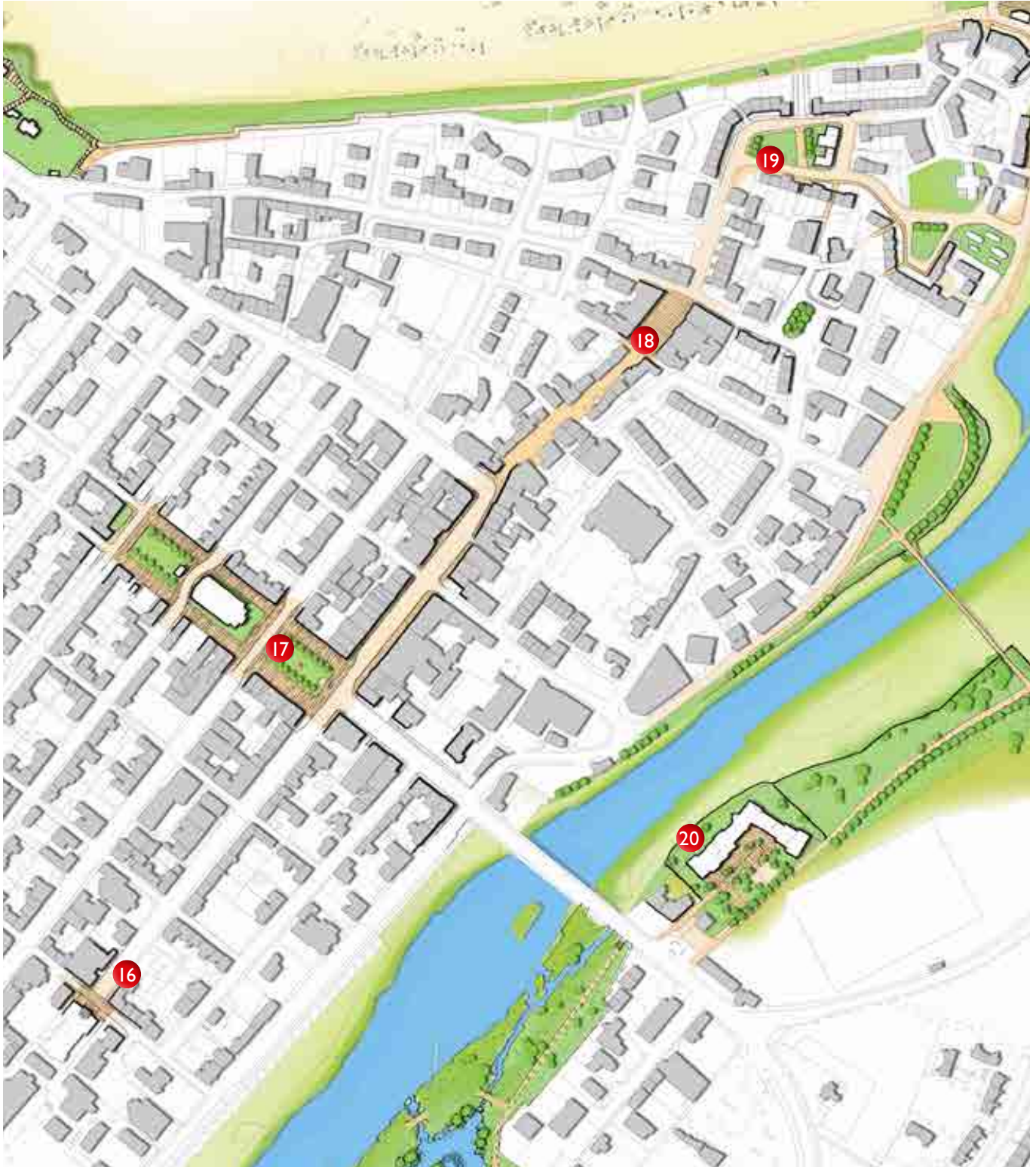
The water management of the upstream water channel that was constructed to supply the mill could be reviewed creatively as part of the eco park design. Instead of being diverted into the river as at present, the lade could be directed over a series of designed rills along the side of the mill (possibly as an art installation) before dropping to feed the pond. This would provide a gentle flow of fresh aerated water through the pond, creating a healthy environment for wildlife. Outflows of water back to the River Thurso would not be in a single channel but in rivulets that would give a further naturalised quality to the river bank. Depending on the park design and mix of activities, this could include a rivulet through the small arch on the south side of the bridge, originally intended and used as the outflow lade from the mill.



Eastern river side with boating pond in background

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TOWN CENTRE



The Thurso Conservation Area covers both the old town and the new town and is a compact area of heritage interest with listed buildings and the Grade A listed mediaeval Old St. Peter's Kirk site. The residential streets are well maintained, many shop fronts are active on the commercial streets and the High Street is pedestrianised and paved in parts with local Caithness flagstone. The challenge of retaining employment levels that can sustain the local economy into the future is real and will be reflected in the vibrancy of the town centre. Currently it could be argued that there is nothing that is fundamentally problematic with the town centre and that further focus should be given to developing gap sites, finding new uses for empty buildings and extending areas of environmental improvement that can enhance the quality of the place.

Some such environmental improvements to the public realm can be considered along Princes Street, which on the Sinclair new town plan connected into the south west end of the old High Street. The street plan stopped this important route with the school building (now the library) with pedimented portico and cupola, all designed centrally with the street axis. The current investment in the library building fabric could be matched by a public realm scheme at the end of the street that responds to the townscape importance of the building ¹⁶ with widened footways in local natural material and a setted carriageway, for example. At the centre of Princes Street, Sir John's Square is a public space that could be improved and made more accessible. ¹⁷ Within the High Street, the most impressive buildings are the Town Hall and former Carnegie Library (now museum). Footways have been repaved but there should be scope for a full treatment of the street as a shared surface flexible use area, paved throughout in quality natural materials. ¹⁸ The ancient High Street route continues on towards the coast into the Shore Street area. The C20th two storey residential housing in this area is of vernacular style with steeply sloping roofs, gables, pends and some natural stone details. Unfortunately the public spaces in these residential areas are disappointing given the proximity of the historic High Street and the adjacent Old St.

Peter's Kirk scheduled ancient monument. Alternative treatments are proposed as part of the masterplan. ¹⁹



Thurso High Street

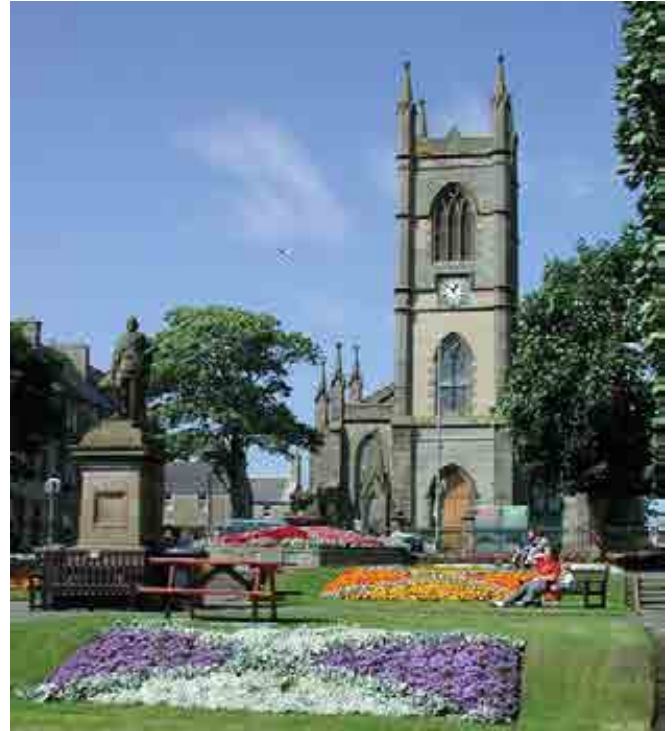
It was stated at the Charrette that the river was a popular asset upstream of the bridge but unloved downstream. There are several proposals in the masterplan as to how this could be addressed and the last half mile of the river transformed into an attractive environment with suitable new uses that relate to the river or the coast.

At the southern end of the road bridge, extending up to the Ellan footbridge, there is a number of large river-edge sites that have either been cleared or are currently in use as a builders' yard. The Charrette proposes that over time, land use that is not contributing positively to the river amenity should be relocated onto more appropriate sites. It is proposed that between the bridges a combination of residential use and river park treatment could be developed. ²⁰

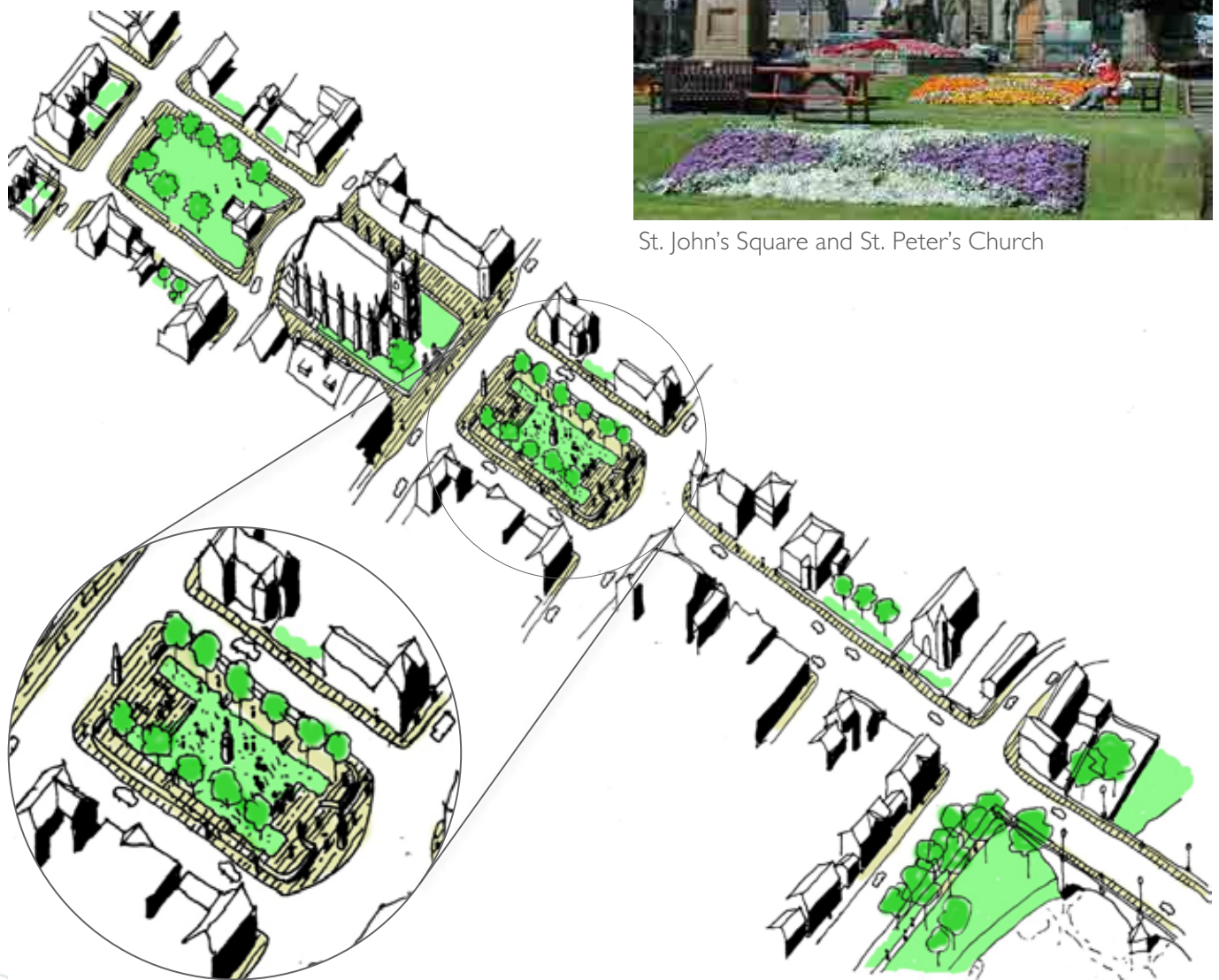
Some of these masterplan proposals are illustrated on the following pages.

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SIR JOHN'S SQUARE AND ENVIRONS



St. John's Square and St. Peter's Church



Town Centre Strategy

The sketch shows Sir George's Street in the centre of Thurso with the bridge to the right and Sir John's Square, West Church Street and East Church Street to the left. The planned sequence of streets and places is the impressive "set piece" that provides the approach to Thurso from the south. It is a fine example of townscape design in Scotland. Some public realm improvements are possible in this area and some traffic calming would be appropriate although this would be limited where the A9 trunk route passes through. The narrower streets to either side of the central church building could be enhanced by a shared surface treatment and some widened footways in other areas with all new pedestrian surfaces in the local Caithness paving material. A more open quality to the enclosed garden of Sir John's Square could be considered that retained the historic quality and monuments but provided less barriers for pedestrians wishing to access the garden.

The sketch suggests that more paving and seating could be integrated into the upper and lower tiers of the terraced garden.



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SHORE STREET IMPROVEMENTS



Vision of Shore Street

The largest of the public open spaces in residential areas is in Shore Street. **19** Here the public realm has been abandoned to rough ground and informal car parking. A more efficient car park layout could be incorporated into a small residential pocket park with hedge and tree planting and quality paving. The photomontage gives a flavour of a less car dominated space that is attractive for people to look out to and walk through and on pleasant summer's days can be used by residents.



View across car park at Shore Street



COMMERCIAL SITE TRANSFORMED FOR PARK AND HOUSING



Vision of riverside area from Thurso Bridge

The photograph shows the brown field site and builders yard in the distance behind the existing residential properties. **20** The masterplan proposes that the site on this bank between the bridges could be developed as both residential and river park. Ideally a pedestrian walkway would continue along the river's edge but if this proved problematic or too expensive, the route from the boating pond could continue northwards by crossing towards the Bridgend Filling Station.



View looking north from Thurso Bridge



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NEW MARINE AND RETAIL VILLAGE

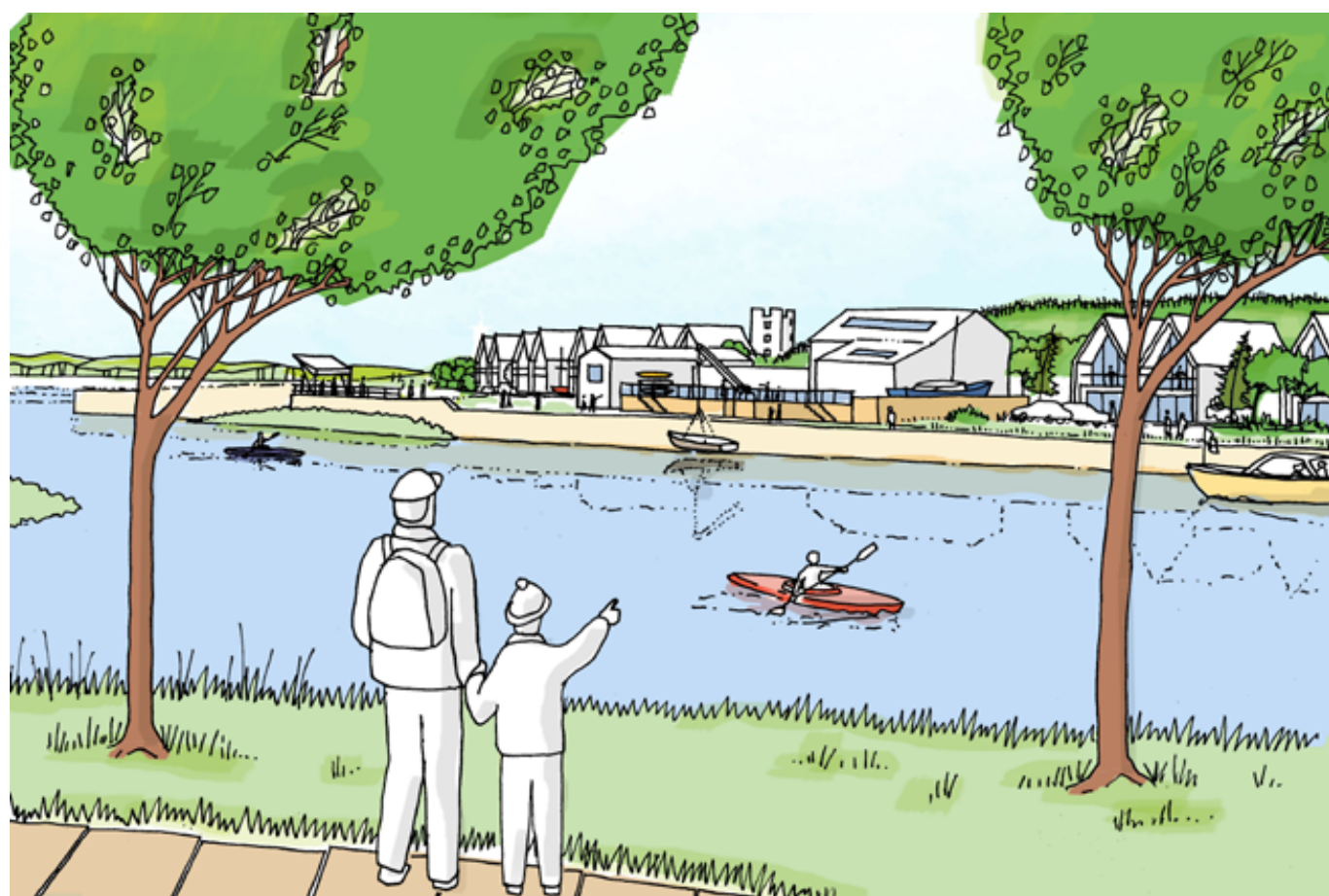
Where the river meets the sea can be a special location. At Thurso, it provided a natural haven and the river banks were developed as quaysides for landing fish, general trading and the stone export industry. The river environment still retains some of the remnants of its former commercial heyday including made up ground of ballast slag and other structures towards Thurso Castle that have succumbed to the constant pounding of the weather. The masterplan seeks to retain uses that have a reason to be at the river and to propose the relocation of uses that do not. This would allow a more natural setting of the river to be recovered for these post-industrial sites. The amenity of the river would be attractive for residential development and cold water sports.

At the Riverside Road car park at the northern end of Ellan Bridge, the plan proposes that environmental improvements be carried out in order to enhance this prominent sweep in the river. **21** Some car parking could be incorporated into this site but hardy, water-tolerant tree planting would be used to provide screening and a visual greening to the river scene.

On the opposite bank there is development on both sides of Sir Archibald Road that now has little or nothing to do with the river location. The masterplan proposes that such uses would be relocated and the site redeveloped as residential with a marine theme, possibly through the architectural form, treatment of details or the additional space for small craft trailers, etc. **22**



Town Centre Strategy



View looking east to transformed riverside

The illustration shows how both sides of the river could be enhanced by environmental improvements with greater use of the river being made for water sports and on the far shore, industrial and retail uses giving way to residential and riverside amenity landscape. **22**



Current view of the river mouth

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HARBOUR PROMONTORY

A new quarter is proposed for the promontory between the river and the beach. This would relate to cold water sports, surfing, sea kayaking and sea food retailing with cafes, bars and restaurants. **23** Existing uses that are not compatible with this type of development or have no connection with river or sea should be relocated to more suitable sites. The emergence of Thurso as an acclaimed destination in the surfing world due to quality of waves produced by the flat stone shelving will generate growing demand. Positions near the town and near the waves from which to view water sports in the bay should be created. At the end of the promontory, the area could be decluttered of redundant structures and a new landform created to provide banking from which to view.





View of proposed marine sports and retail village

The sketch shows that some of the existing buildings could be retained at the promontory to incrementally grow a cluster of buildings to a masterplan for a new marine and retail village around a contained courtyard. Sunny corners out of the wind would be used for cafes while the shared surface would provide an informal quality to the area. New landmark buildings like an elevated events cabin would provide a prominence to the village.



Existing buildings on promontory

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Vision of proposed landform along harbour front

The end point of the river at the promontory point could be developed as an interesting destination for visitors and residents of the town. While some places for sitting in the car and looking out to sea could be retained, the balance needs to be less for traffic and more for pedestrians and amenity space. The idea of bunding the area with a landform that would provide a higher vantage point is proposed which could be used informally for spectator events in the water or as a recreational area. The photomontage indicates that some modest transformation could help to make places more useful and memorable through design.



Current view of Harbour front

Town Centre Strategy

THURSO CASTLE

Thurso Castle is a historic landmark on Thurso Bay. The Gatelodge is a listed building of high Victorian exuberance and is very prominent on the tourist road to and from the Castle of Mey and John O'Groats. Despite its exposed location, the castle has established shelter belt tree planting, an avened driveway, terraced formal gardens and protected walled gardens. Some of these garden environments could be suitable as community garden projects that could undertake a programme of repair and restoration in some areas and therapeutic market gardening in others. (Please note: The Thurso Castle is private property, and there is currently no public access to the castle or grounds.)

24 The Thurso River walk referred to earlier could join (or merge) at the mouth of the river with a properly constructed coastal path to the shore side of the castle and thereby extend the route eastwards towards Dunnet.

