

LEEDS

A WATERFRONT CITY?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Leeds City Council has set a corporate objective of being the “best city” in the UK by 2030. The city has experienced significant growth over the last twenty five years, and has positioned itself as one of the key economic centres in the north of England. Leeds City Centre has been at the heart of this growth with new office and retail development very much the driving force.

The city centre has also seen significant investment in residential development, starting with the restoration of former warehouses along the north bank of the River Aire and expanding along the waterways on both the north and south banks, with both refurbishment and new-build schemes in equal measure. Of course the concept of city centre living is not a new phenomenon but in the last two decades 12,000 new dwellings have been created in the city centre in turn spawning the growth in convenience shopping, leisure venues and, more recently, education and health infrastructure. The City Centre is earmarked for further considerable housing growth over the next 15 years. Throughout all of this runs the River Aire and the Leeds-Liverpool Canal, which in 2016 celebrated its 200th anniversary.

Leeds City Council has recently earmarked a significant area of the City Centre, along the “South Bank” of the River Aire, as an area for major regeneration, with the waterways running alongside the South Bank area fundamental to its future.

Whilst the environment around the Waterfront has much improved over the last quarter of a century, especially in terms of water quality, it remains a largely underutilised asset, which is disconnected from much of the city centre.

This paper sets out the Chamber’s views on how we can celebrate the waterfront, taking pleasure in its existence and maximising the economic benefits such infrastructure can bring to Leeds.

This document is intended to renew interest, drive ambition for change, and deliver a waterside in the City Centre that meets the economic and social needs of the City, which we believe will help it to become the “best city” in 2030.



2. CREATING A LEEDS WATERFRONT DISTRICT

Once considered to be the dumping ground for the by-products of industry, commerce and city life, our waterfront was for many years the primary route to market for the city's manufactured goods and services. In order to access this 'highway' efficiently many of the original Victorian buildings back right up to it, effectively walling it off from view of the wider city centre. It is only in more recent times that the quality of public realm and, by extension the waterways, have been truly appreciated and been assigned economic value. Despite this recognition, parts of the waterfront remain cut off or underutilised, in turn creating areas populated by anti-social activity, environmental disorder and neglect.

In order to bring new life to the waterfront and realise its full potential, the Chamber is calling for a focus on three key areas, namely:

- **Accessibility**, improving movement across, around and along the waterfront.
- **Attraction**, addressing environmental, public safety and cleanliness issues.
- **Activity** which animates both the waterfront and waterway, and makes it a place where people want to be.

The waterfront is not in single ownership and very many stakeholders will have their own vested interests; however, this document seeks to act as a rallying call for all parties to come together and work towards a shared vision.



3. THE VISION

It is the Chamber's view that the waterfront should be an area where all users of the City, - including residents, visitors, and workers - have good access to a high quality and active waterside environment.

Geographical scope of Waterfront District

Whilst all of the rivers and canals which flow through Leeds are important, this report focuses on the River Aire and the Leeds - Liverpool Canal from Wellington Bridge downstream to Low Folds. The geographical extent of the area covered by this Report (referred to as the 'Waterfront District') falls within the designated City Centre Boundary set within the Council's Development Plan. It is an important, but largely forgotten, asset and has huge potential to add to the City's economic, social, environmental and cultural offer.



4. WHAT MAKES A GOOD WATERFRONT?

The best waterfronts from around the world share many similar attributes including

- High quality public realm which is easily accessed from both land and water, and is navigable for both business and leisure use. Public spaces are connected to each other.
- An environment which has vitality, whilst respecting both its natural environment and neighbours within it.
- They host events and activities.
- Amenities which facilitate positive human interaction such as public art as well as more practical matters such as seating, waste receptacles and lighting.
- The identity of the waterfront reflects the heritage and culture of the location and is readily identifiable both within the city and beyond.

As a consequence, such areas are cared for and are a source of immense pride.



Access to the waterfront from other parts of the City Centre, and beyond, has been improved in recent times, but there remains a need to improve this further, if its true value to the City is to be realised.

So how does Leeds compare?

The Leeds Waterfront, in places, has exceptional elements which reflect some of the attributes above. More recent development has respected the need to connect to and along the waterfront, new footbridges have provided connectivity across the river and heritage buildings have been restored sympathetically.

The city already plays host to an annual waterfront festival which is now into its tenth year. This is a well-attended and well supported event and brings many people down to the river over a single weekend in June. In 2015 the river also provided a back drop for the spectacular 'Whale Song' as part of Light Night, the city's annual celebration of arts and creative talent. The importance of culture within the context of Leeds Waterfront cannot be underestimated.

Since the early 1990s the waterfront has seen some significant regeneration; despite this there are still very many areas which could be improved upon. Some of these interventions could be carried out relatively quickly.

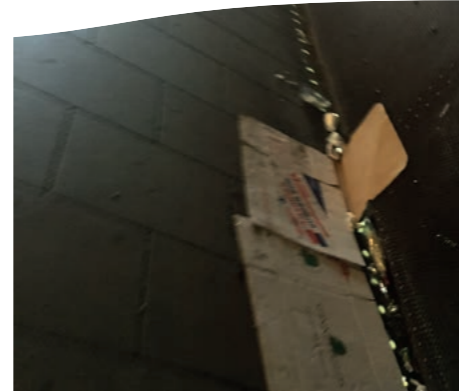
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5. HOW DO WE IMPROVE THE WATERFRONT NOW AND WHERE ARE THE QUICK WINS?

Whilst the Leeds Waterfront has many outstanding locations, there are also very many other places in need of significant improvement. The quality and cleanliness of the Waterfront environment requires immediate attention.



The list of 'Grot Spots' is quite long and we believe should be tackled as a matter of urgency. Of particular note are the following locations.

i. Whitehall Road to Leeds Station (north bank). For much of its length the waterfront is reasonably well maintained - however lighting and surfaces are poor in places, fences need to be repaired and vegetation should be maintained. Multiple ownership of waterfront property is evidenced by the inconsistency in pathways, some of which are in a poor state of repair. We acknowledge recent excellent work carried out on behalf of the Environment Agency in tackling overgrowing foliage along this stretch of the north bank.

ii. Leeds station and Dark Arches. Mostly in the ownership of Network Rail, this is one of the main gateways into Leeds City Centre. The land fronting the river is heavily overgrown and in places has been used as a dumping ground for refuse. Many of the buildings have attracted graffiti and generally the area is in dire need of cleaning and exudes a presence of gloom. There are clear signs that the area around the station attracts anti-social behaviour and vagrant activity.

iii. Leeds Station -Globe Road-Whitehall Road (south bank and canal footpath). Predominantly Network Rail owned land but also includes land owned by CEG, Taylor Wimpey and the Canal & River Trust. This is a well-used cycle and pedestrian route into the city centre but, as mentioned above, the area is overgrown, poorly maintained, poorly lit and suffers from anti-social activities.

iv. Neville Street - Sovereign Street - Leeds Bridge. This stretch of the north bank suffers from excessive and heavily overgrown foliage obscuring sight lines along the pathway and poorly maintained public realm, although we acknowledge recent activity by the Environment Agency has made much needed improvements. The river and walkway is screened off by buildings in places, with fences providing further disconnection to the city centre - parts of the intended public walkway identified as such during the development process have been appropriated by adjoining occupiers, so severing the through route (e.g. Brasserie Blanc). The area is poorly lit and again there are signs of anti-social behaviour and vagrant activity. The steps down from Leeds Bridge are poorly sign-posted so it looks like a route to nowhere.





Connectivity

Excellent connectivity, both to and through the Waterfront District, is vital to its success.

Connecting to or travelling along the Waterfront on foot or by cycle can be difficult. There is a lack of consistency and continuity in terms of signage and naming strategy and this makes navigation difficult for anyone unfamiliar with the city. Signs and logos adopted already in the area include the Aire Valley Towpath Route, Matthew Murray Trail, Riverside and Brewery Wharf.

Wayfinding to the Waterfront from other parts of the City needs improving, as its presence is not obvious to visitors to the City Centre.



Accessibility

Due to the multiple ownership of land holdings adjacent to the waterfront there is inconsistent access in places. Some parts of the waterfront are totally blocked off to the public requiring detours for pedestrians and cyclists. In many cases these barriers are in place to provide security benefits, but they also block off natural surveillance and perversely may create the environment for crime to take place in.

The Chamber is seeking greater permeability through, along and across the waterfront which would generate more activity and in turn create a safer, more people friendly environment.



Making more of existing public realm

Along the north bank from Whitehall Road via Leeds railway station to Leeds Bridge, access to the waterfront is reasonably well established, although steps and locked gates reduce accessibility in places. However, notwithstanding the points raised earlier about environment and public safety, there are spaces along the waterfront which, with improvements to signage and wayfinding, regular maintenance and relatively little investment, could be brought to life as quality public open spaces.

Bringing people to the waterfront, creating activity and using the space would be one way to tackle some of the anti-social activities currently taking place. Creating spaces where people want to gather has worked exceptionally well in other locations in the city, such as Millennium Square, Park Place and the new Sovereign Square. Extending the city centre Wi-Fi coverage or encouraging commercial vendors to these locations will also help deliver more activity. Provision of public art and more seating could be a relatively low cost intervention which would also attract more people to the area.

Biodiversity

The waterways are a rich environment for nature, and it is important that any intervention does not harm the ecological systems that exist. Strategies should be put in place which protect and enhance the biodiversity of the waterways.

Promoting and directing people to the waterfront.

It is unsurprising that the waterfront remains underutilised if it is so 'invisible' to many. What proportion of the city's university students are aware of the waterfront for example? Apart from those people who make use of the waterfront as part of their journey to work or home, how many other people are aware of the city's waterfront?



Short to medium term actions:

i. **Immediate clean-up of the most visible 'Grot Spots'.**

Particular focus on property owners and landlords to encourage them to take ownership of the issues within their portfolios, especially Network Rail. Involvement of Leeds BID Ranger Team (for North Bank locations) could be an option.

ii. **Investigate legal duties and responsibilities** of riparian ownership for Leeds Waterfront property owners.

iii. **Improve access to Waterfront.**

Encourage owners of existing waterfront property to remove barriers such as locked gates and fences.

iv. **Pilot project to commission 'Art in unusual places'.** Linked to this should be a promotional campaign and signage to direct people to these installations which may be semi-permanent or 'pop-up' in nature.

v. **Establish a Waterfront Charter for Leeds**

The Chamber acknowledges the multi-agency response to flooding in December 2015 and the resultant clear up required to resolve the environmental issues this created. We have publicly commended Leeds City Council for the leadership shown on the matter. We would now like to see collaboration across all stakeholders, including property owners, to sign up to a Waterfront Charter setting out minimum standards of maintenance and environmental management.

vi. **Investigate funding models for a Waterfront Stewardship programme.**

Transforming the Waterfront into a high quality environment will require significant funding over time. Innovative funding mechanisms may need to be considered, for example allowing developers to offset improvements to the Waterfront against other planning obligations or establishing a charitable fund. Examples in other cities include Business Improvement Districts. How might a fund, ring-fenced from S106 and / or CIL function be created?

vii. **Create a single identity for the Waterfront.**

Adopt easy to follow routes which are well signed and where the various connecting links into the route are also clearly identifiable.

viii. **Seek to create 'designed in' usage through the development process.**

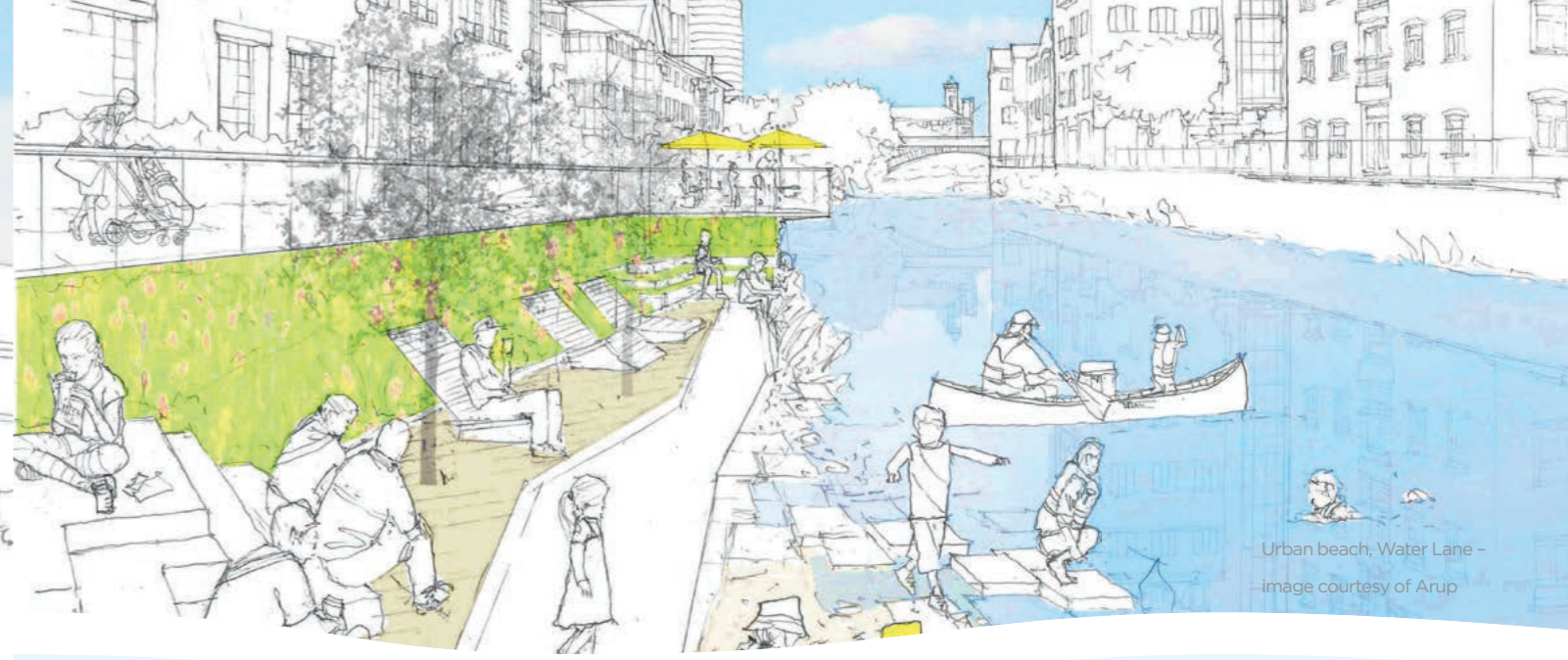
Create a 'busy' environment by asking that new developments include improved accessibility, amenity and design elements which promote the use of the Waterfront and improve the quality of the environment it provides. A Waterfront Policy in the form of supplementary planning guidance to be adopted by Leeds City Council would guide developers, architects and the planners as to the City's ambition for this part of Leeds.

ix. **Establishing 'Waterfront Design Awards'**

to allow developers and others who adopt best practice in their approach to the Waterfront to be recognised for their efforts. This could be extended to recognise individuals who contribute in other ways through litter clearance, environmental improvements or helping to address anti-social behaviour as it affects the Waterfront area.

x. **Water activities and events programme.**

Currently a water taxi funded by Allied London traverses the river from Leeds Dock to the station; consider expanding the service to increase the number of stops. Consider providing opportunities for sporting events to take place on the river, examples might include rowing, kayaking or canoeing; Row UK are proposing their first city event, with a test water based festival weekend, in July 2017.



Urban beach, Water Lane - image courtesy of Arup

6. FUTURE DEVELOPMENT - “THE WATERFRONT AT THE HEART OF THE CITY CENTRE”

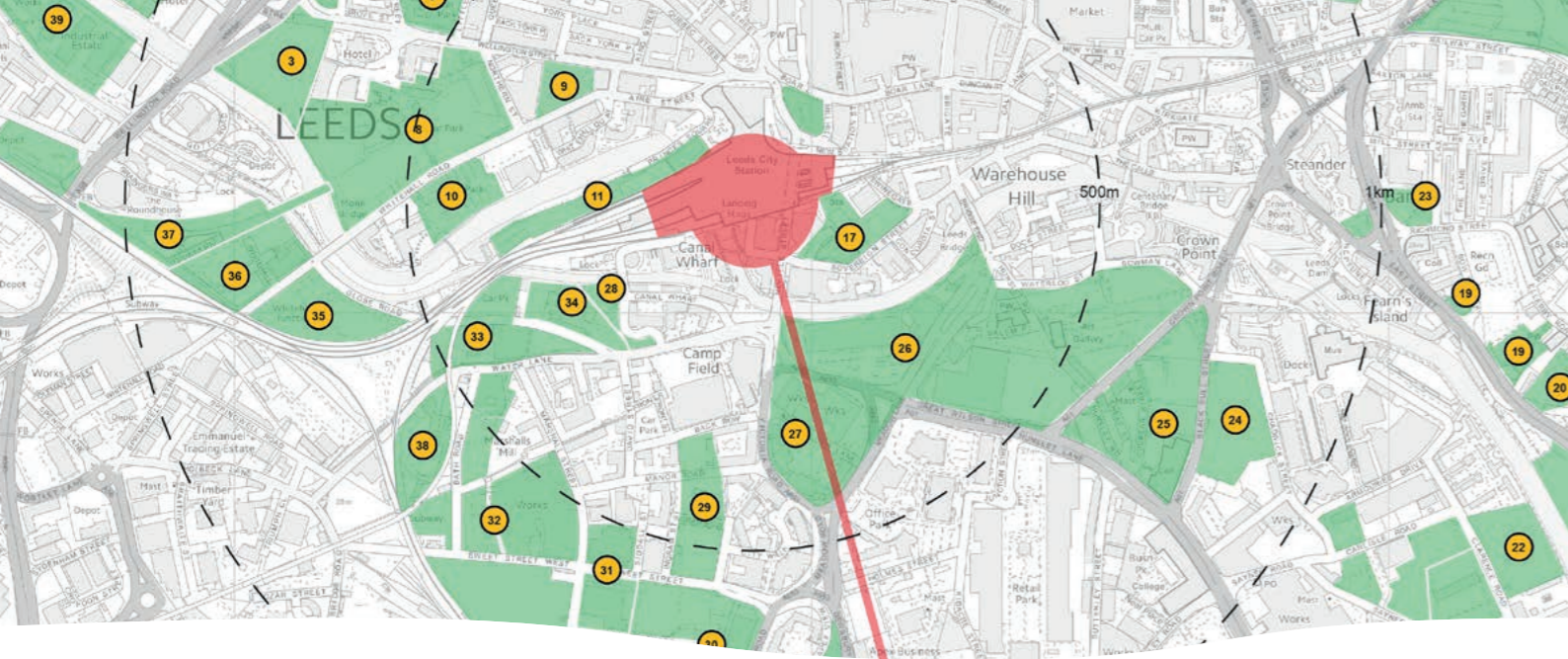
Further development is planned along the waterfront, particularly within South Bank Leeds. The arrival of HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail into an expanded Leeds station presents both challenge and opportunity to bring further activity to Leeds Waterfront. The Chamber fully supports the ambition set out in Leeds City Council’s South Bank Leeds - Framework Plan (<https://southbankleeds.co.uk>), relating to future use of the waterfront. The document urges all future development to integrate into the waterfront allowing people to ‘get in touch with the water’.

As the city centre extends southwards, the river which was formerly the southern boundary to the city centre will now be right in the centre and this presents huge opportunities to make more of the Waterfront District.

As of March 2016 the Chamber had identified 41 development opportunities within the core city centre within a 15 minute walk of the proposed Yorkshire Hub. A significant proportion of these would benefit from improved accessibility along Leeds Waterfront.

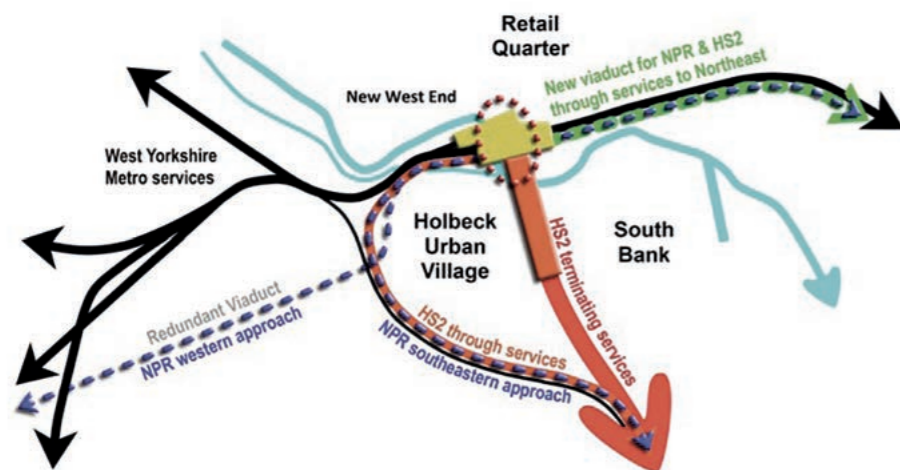


Urban forestry, Leeds Railway Station - image courtesy of Arup



Improved Connectivity

Proposals for a new river crossing exist in the Climate Innovation District site at Low Folds, currently being developed by Citu; the bridge will not only connect complementary development sites across the river but it is proposed to carry infrastructure to service the Leeds District Heating Network. Further proposals exist to create the David Oluwale Memorial Park on the South Bank adjacent to Asda House. Landing in this park could be a new footbridge across the River Aire from Sovereign Square, providing an additional crossing for pedestrians and cyclists. Moving upstream, proposals to put a new canal bridge at Globe Road to give access to Holbeck, connecting with the existing footbridge at Whitehall Riverside, are also being considered.



Waterfront Parks

Giving people a reason to use the waterfront will create more activity and it is important that the activity should appeal to all ages. The Chamber would like to see a series of pocket parks at locations along the waterfront, creating nodes of activity, connected to each other and to the city centre north and south of the river.

Water based transport infrastructure

According to the Canal & River Trust, the River Aire and canal network effectively makes Leeds a European Gateway with the ability to attract sizeable craft from Goole as far as Leeds Dock. The Leeds Liverpool Canal then becomes a restriction, though the provision of additional safe marina space in developments within the South Bank would attract more narrowboat type leisure craft.

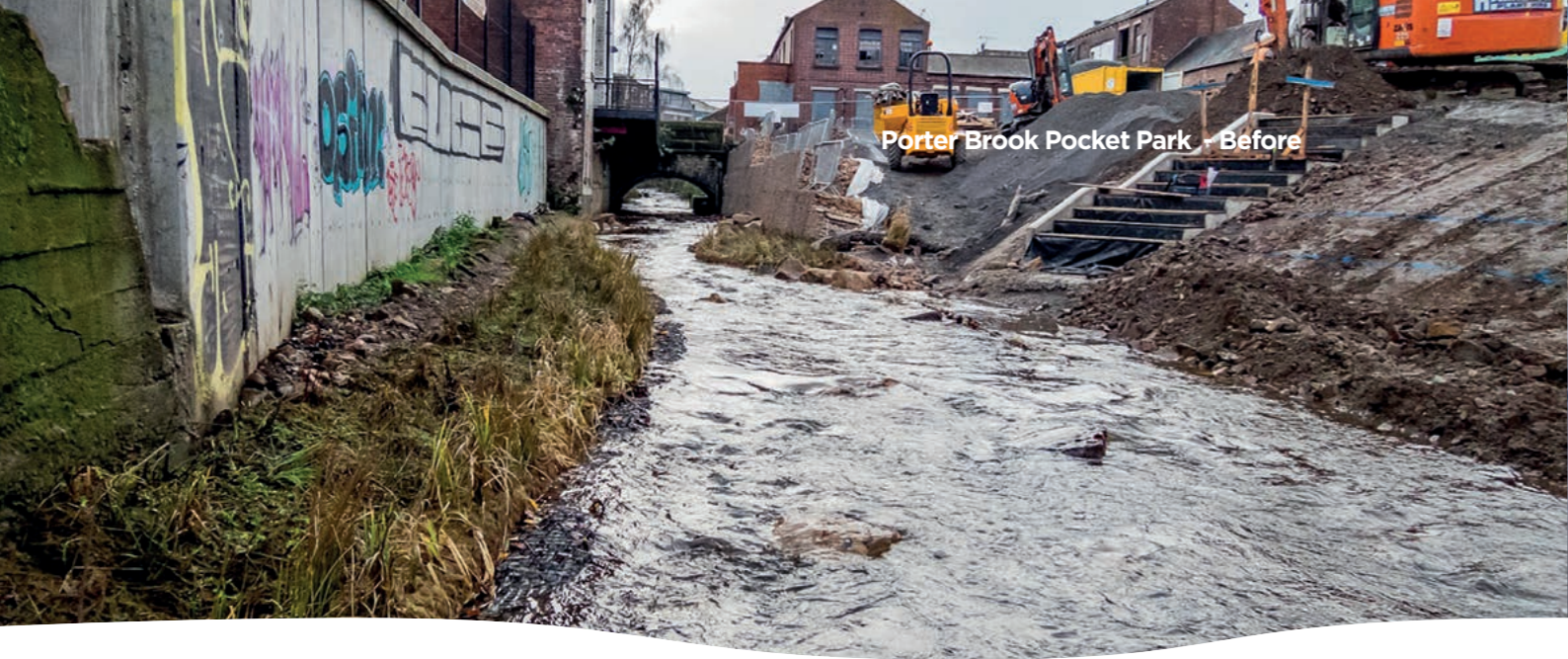
Moorings generate income and waterside property is generally sold at a premium. Development should not compromise or sterilise existing wharf space and where possible should consider the creation of better waterside infrastructure to allow greater use of the waterway for both transport and freight. Developments could consider the construction of marinas with economic benefits for the city (employment) and developers (land and property values). An innovative recommendation from the Canal & River Trust has been to consider use of the waterway for 'last mile' transport initiatives.

Flood alleviation scheme (FAS)

Leeds FAS phase 1 is scheduled for completion in summer 2017 with a business case for phase 2 due for submission also in 2017. Arup who are one of the consortium partners delivering both schemes produced a report in October 2014, entitled '**FAS+ Enhancing the Leeds Waterfront**'.

Arup, whose global water business is based in Leeds, set out a series of recommendations including heritage and cultural trails, urban forestry, 'active edges' and urban beaches, which provides a menu of physical intervention that would help to improve the public realm and build on the FAS by enhancing the landscape.

We would endorse these recommendations and encourage future development to accommodate these suggestions.



Porter Brook Pocket Park - Before



Porter Brook Pocket Park - After

7. WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OTHER CITIES?

Leeds is not alone in tackling historic waterfront issues. The industrial revolution took hold in cities with waterfronts and those which didn't built their own. The legacy that many cities have been left to deal with is extensive and Leeds could learn from best practice across the country.

a) Sheffield

Sheffield in many ways is tackling similar challenges to those faced by Leeds, namely Victorian industrial buildings which back directly on to the waterfront and culverted watercourses creating flood resilience issues. In September 2013, Sheffield City Council published "City of Rivers - Sheffield's Waterways Strategy" (<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/planning-and-city-development/regeneration/waterways-strategy.html>) which sets out a "strategic and comprehensive approach to the treatment of the River and access to it."

The strategic vision is described as follows,

"By 2022 our rivers will once again become central in making Sheffield, providing places where people choose to live, work and invest. Our watercourses and river corridors will be the defining features of a modern competitive, sustainable and attractive city, rich in wildlife and offering a wonderful quality of life to residents, workers and visitors."

Two recent examples include Porter Brook Pocket Park and Nursery Street Pocket Park.

Sheffield - Porter Brook Pocket Park



Sheffield - Nursery Street Pocket Park



Nursery Street Pocket Park - Before



Nursery Street Pocket Park - After



b) Birmingham – Brindley Place

Brindley Place, named in honour of canal engineer James Brindley, was until the 1970s at the heart of Birmingham’s manufacturing industry. The decline in the sector led to factory closures with the location becoming largely derelict. From 1993, the site has seen significant redevelopment and the waterfront plays a hugely important role. The main developer, Argent, recognised the importance of high quality public realm and ensured the canal infrastructure was integral to this.



c) Bristol Harbourside

Once the main port for the city of Bristol, the harbour has largely been superseded by the port of Avonmouth and Royal Portbury Dock as ships and their cargo became larger. Regeneration of Bristol Harbourside began in the 1980s and continues to the present day and includes new residential, leisure and office development, including low-rise family housing within walking distance of the city centre. Bristol Harbourside has an active events programme including an annual tall ships festival and has played host to the International Festival of the Sea.





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8. CONCLUSION

Future developments around South Bank Leeds present enormous opportunities to reconnect and expand the city centre, placing Leeds Waterfront at the heart of a thriving business district where previously it has been its southern boundary.

The Chamber acknowledges the work currently being carried out by Leeds City Council to establish the South Bank masterplan and believe strongly that short to medium term measures should be taken in advance of this to bring the existing waterfront up to the standard befitting one of the UK's key economic centres.

Partners, including Leeds City Council, the Environment Agency, the Canal & River Trust along with Yorkshire Water are already working together to make improvements to the waterfront and manage flood resilience but we feel the private sector, and property owners in particular, should also take an active role. The waterfront should be an immense source of pride for the city, which in turn will create increased commercial opportunities as we have seen over the last twenty five years. Looking forward to the next twenty five years the city centre will see further, significant redevelopment. Developing partnerships to take on responsibility for stewardship and management of the Waterfront District could be hugely beneficial for the Leeds economy, creating places and spaces where people really want to be in the heart of a vibrant city centre.

9. CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to the people and businesses who have made valuable contributions to the production of this report.

Tim Waring
Quod

Karen Butler
Leeds BID

Allison Page
DLA Piper

Leanne Buchan
Leeds City Council

Jonathan Morgan
City Living

Jonathan Moxon
Leeds City Council

Mike Piet
Leeds Civic Trust

Martin Jones
Environment Agency

Guy Gilfillan
Colliers

David Wilkes
Arup

Guy Denton
re-form landscape architecture

Nigel Morris
Arup

Granville Davies
Yorkshire Water

Peter Connolly
Yorkshire Design Group

Jon Horsfall
Canal & River Trust

Paul Ellison
Yorkshire Design Group

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Quod
Capitol
Bond Court
Leeds
LS1 5SP
0113 245 1243
www.quod.com

DLA Piper UK LLP
Princes Exchange
Princes Square
Leeds
LS1 4BY
www.dlapiper.com

**re-form landscape
architecture**
Tower Works
Globe Road
Leeds
LS11 5QG
0113 245 4695
www.re-formlandscape.com

Arup
Rose Wharf
78 East Street
Leeds
LS9 8EE
0113 242 8498
www.arup.com

Canal & River Trust
Fearn's Wharf
Neptune Street
Leeds
LS9 8PB
0303 040 4040
www.canalrivertrust.org.uk

LeedsBID
104 Briggate
Leeds
West Yorkshire
LS1 6BG
0113 467 2780
www.leedsbid.co.uk



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