

The creation of quality new water space on the Fountainbridge site.



Discussion paper for Sounding Board meeting 30/4/2013

1. Introduction

There is strong community support for the potential role that the provision of new water space could play in creating a new quality canalside community at Fountainbridge as envisaged by the 2011 Edinburgh Canal Strategy. The opportunity to create new waterspace as a core part of a vibrant new waterside quarter in Edinburgh is seen by many as a “once in a lifetime” opportunity not to be missed.

The provision of new waterspace is seen as key contributor to the overall vision:

- It will enhance the current very limited waterspace available at the Edinburgh end of the Millennium Link, enabling the canal network, and Edinburgh’s role within it to grow and develop as a major recreational and tourist asset for Edinburgh and central Scotland.
- New waterspace will create a unique context and driver for a quality regeneration project with both profile and a ‘wow factor’ which will enhance Edinburgh’s civic reputation and attractiveness.
- It will provide an invaluable local community asset and benefit from the development for both active and passive use, enhance the setting of the canal, and give the vision of an Edinburgh Canal Quarter some real credibility.

2. Background

It is to their credit that the Council's Planning section fully recognised this unique potential when drawing up various briefs and masterplans for the redevelopment of the old brewery site. Also in the relevant policy documents from both the Council and BWS (now Scottish Canals) it was recognised that in order to maximise the public investment of the Millennium Link, there was a requirement for a future increased quality and capacity of waterspace at the Edinburgh "terminus" of the Link. For example, there was a tacit assumption that new water space, along with range of other infra-structural and environmental requirements would form part of the reasonable planning gain. These community benefits would be achieved through substantial redevelopment and profitable new uses, which would result in a substantial uplift in the value of the site and the ensuing development.

The anticipated provision of new waterspace was also seen as one part of a development package which also included substantial change of use and the anticipation of high urban densities. The Springside and Napier Students flats development and indicative plans for the new school demonstrate that in practice the high density element is now going ahead.

If local planning is to mean anything in reality, it is clearly important that elements of development guidelines which provide community and environment enhancement and benefit are implemented and not pared back or forgotten. We believe that the Council as developer must be seen to adhere to the Councils own planning policy otherwise a dangerous precedent is set for other developers to exploit.

Since the Royal Bank proposal, it appears that two arguments are gaining ground:

- Firstly, given the financial climate, financing and the demand for development is more constrained, impacting on values and profitability. (Or at least developers may be making this case, to question the affordability of proposed planning gains and community benefits)
- Secondly, the indicative site for the new water space in the form of a new basin has a number of technical challenges with cost implications, principally the steep change in levels from the canal to the basin site. This would result in a suspended basin or major lock, with requirement for significant support structure (also creating areas of undercroft which could be used for car parking.)

Given the above, we appreciate the Council now finds itself in a challenging position, as it is now in the position of both Planning Authority and Developer, both with different demands and priorities. The Council also needs to ensure an adequate and timely return on its capital outlay to fund other needed projects. Here it is again to the credit of the Council that it had the foresight in the past to recognise the potential of a sustainable Fountainbridge canalside development and in positive discussions with FCI has reconfirmed its commitment to creating a quality place and sustainable community.

However when the subject of new waterspace is raised there appears to be a deafening silence.

3. Current position of FCI (Fountainbridge Canalside Initiative)

FCI is determined to work with the Council and other interested parties to help to create a sustainable new waterside community that maximises the potential and works for everyone. We are in total support of the original Planning views on the development of the site - that new waterspace is a key element. It is in this context that this paper is being put forward to the Sounding Board group.

As Oscar Wilde suggested, one can know “the price of everything, but the value of nothing”. It is of course difficult to “value” the contribution of new water space in purely financial/ economic terms, but it is well recognised to be invaluable in place-making terms, helping to turn run of the mill development into something attractive and exceptional. There is new or restored waterspace in a wide variety of cities in both the UK and Europe with plenty of excellent examples of the role it can play in world class regeneration.

Quality and well placed new waterspace is an investment for the future and not an abnormal cost or liability.

Other cities would give their eye-teeth to create a new canal quarter so close to the city centre, and would understand the need for upfront investment in quality place-making. We believe that it is particularly important when times are hard that the one thing not too be lost is the vision. Realistically there is not yet a critical mass of waterspace at Fountainbridge to sustain and develop a future Edinburgh Canal Quarter.

The Options

FCI fully appreciate the challenge that new waterspace presents to any developer of the site, but we agree with the Council as the Planning Authority in proposing its provision and that it is a “once in a life time opportunity “not to be missed.

We feel that it is pro-active local planning in the best interests of the area, and part of the reasonable planning gain and infra-structure to be expected given change of use of the whole site from industrial to a wide variety of mixed uses so close the city centre.

Planning documents, including the outline application suggested three options around the potential creation of at least 1000sqm of new waterspace, which we have updated in the light of our public discussions.

- 1 **A new basin** linked to the canal with a lift bridge for the towpath. This would provide a new landmark feature around which a mix of uses could be designed providing both a new tourist/visitor attraction and a high quality residential environment as well space for static/operational boats. Good innovative design would maximise waterside values and could utilise undercroft carparking.
- 2 An **enlarged existing basin** between Viewforth and Leamington. The lost towpath/quayside could be replaced adjoining the enlarged basin to the north, on the perimeter of the development site fronting both the canal and proposed development blocks. The towpath and its pedestrian/cycle routes would be only slightly diverted around the larger basin area. There are a number of considerations in relation to this option such as lower cost, technically more manageable, increase moorings and

recreational use, connecting the two listed bridge structures (Viewforth and Leamington)

- 3 **Waterscape or water features** that run into the site and enhance the environment and access to water would be a positive addition. However, unconnected and unspecified features would not be supported and seen as token gestures.

4. Conclusion

This paper has been developed by FCI to initiate a transparent discussion on new waterspace through the Sounding Board Forum.

We would like to see:

- At least 1000sqm of new operational waterspace connected or capable of being connected to the canal
- A Council/EDI commitment in principle to explore these options
- Council/EDI in partnership with FCI and Scottish Canals instigate transparent option appraisals and feasibility studies for option delivery as part of overall Masterplanning process.
- All stakeholders seek adopt a “can do” approach with regard to the delivery of new waterspace and investigate possible funding sources and financing to achieve it.
- More pro-active engagement with Scottish Canals about their support/involvement.