

Cabinet Office

Urban Communities and Centres

Response to urban challenges

Paper 3



Isle of Man Strategic Plan
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Paper 3

Our Island Plan seeks to revive our urban landscape and improve the public realm in a sustainable way. Achieving this revival requires collaboration across multiple disciplines, and a clear visionary framework can support this endeavour. The strategic plan will help to enhance our urban areas and protect centres, fostering confidence and commitment to make them vibrant places today and adaptable, desirable places for the future.

Cabinet Office, August 2025



Barrack Street, Douglas

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Lord Street, Douglas

Part 1

Understanding our urban communities

City, towns and villages

The Island's urban communities consist of a city, towns and villages. There are other places that are urban in character but for development plan purposes, these 29 settlements make up the majority of the built-up areas of the Island. Some are more densely populated than others, with a strong urban character, in contrast to the smaller villages that are more rural in nature. Yet all have three things in common:



the dominant land use is housing



all have a mix of land uses albeit this variety is more extensive in larger settlements



all have a sense of community or 'place'

The updated Island Plan 2025/2026 re-commits to **building great communities**, and recognises that “the ethos and character of towns and villages is a vital component of the Island's infrastructure and services.” Paper 2 of this set (The pattern and distribution of development) has already stated that to make this happen in the way envisaged then the number and the hierarchy of settlements, that are currently recognised, may need to change.



Hilary Park, Douglas

Evidence presented in this set of preliminary papers suggests the current approach of focusing most new development in or on the edge of existing settlements will be taken forward as the preferred way.

While this inevitably includes the settlements already identified, it is important to recognise that new settlements will be supported as an option where there is evidenced need. This means that the current number of 29 settlements in the recognised hierarchy may increase.

The priority in Our Island Plan is to encourage a focus on the urban landscape, improving public realm and developing brownfield sites.

In terms of the transition between town and country, there is no intention to introduce green belt or grey belt policy approaches but the reviewed plan will look to clarify what is meant by *countryside*, *green gaps*, *land zoned* and *not zoned for development*, and the definition of *previously developed land*.

Consideration will be given to the merits of introducing special landscapes and settlement sensitivity studies will be undertaken - such work will influence the pattern of development and ultimately the expectations placed on our for urban communities and centres.

To make our centres destinations for work, free time and shopping... we need policy approaches to encourage high quality places that support the economy, and thrive over time...

(extract from paper 2).



Outdoor seating on Bucks Road, Douglas

What is an urban community?

Douglas is the economic focal point for the Island and capital city, and is complemented by the regional towns of Peel, Ramsey, Onchan, Castletown, and Port Erin. They drive the local economy at the regional level. Smaller centres too, at the village level, are no less important to their local communities, providing homes, shops, jobs, and services at a smaller scale.

Communities are groups of people who live in the same village, neighbourhood, or area, and who know and may rely on each other. They provide mutual support, a sense of belonging, and contribute to a feeling of safety.

Urban areas and their 'centres' - at whatever scale this may be - form the focus of daily life for the majority of Island residents. Places that we know and recognise are made up of a mix of land uses. Homes are central to the life of our urban areas, and living in town supports access to employment, sustainability goals, and maintains and develops community facilities and services. Additionally, urban living fosters a sense of community, helps tackle loneliness, and enhances social connections.

Yet every settlement has its own sense of place - embodied by the environment, mix and character of buildings and land uses, streetscape, green spaces and the road network. Individual communities have their own distinctive mix of these elements.

The planning framework led by the strategic plan can and does highlight where settlements can grow and change; they provide outline but clear guidance on what development will and will not be acceptable.

The strategic plan to date has served to protect the character of each settlement well. It has managed the expansion of Douglas as intended, and guided development to land zoned for development (unless there were exceptional circumstances).

The aim of the spatial strategy (see paper 2 - The pattern and distribution of development) is to set out broad policy principles for settlement change and growth - which sets the scene for the drafting of area plans.

More detailed guidance about development limits, town centre boundaries, opportunities for different land uses are nearly always provided in detail in the area plans.

The goal of the strategic plan going forward is to reframe the importance of 'settlement', optimise development opportunities in suitable locations, protect the countryside, recognise and elevate the Manx landscape in the spatial strategy, create places where people live and where life happens and embrace placemaking principles for the benefit of everyone.

Urban challenges

Many urban centres across the UK have struggled with vibrancy in recent years and the Isle of Man is no different. The economic conditions faced by many businesses have affected the health of the high street dramatically. The Local Economy Strategy 2025 outlines a lengthy list of challenges, including general financial and economic conditions, online retailing trends (particularly affecting small independent businesses), and the ongoing pattern of home working, which has impacted shopping and spending habits.

The availability and retention of experienced and skilled workers also remains challenging. The outcome under such pressures can limit business expansion and confidence, result in stalled or delayed projects, and a lack of investment in the built environment; all of which threatens the vitality and viability of our centres. In reality, this means, empty shops, underused buildings, partly built sites, ground level temporary car parks and overgrown and neglected public spaces.



Wet paving reflects the street signage in Strand Street, Douglas



Lord Street passes through a residential community, former flats site now a development opportunity, Douglas

Part 2

Efforts to respond to urban challenges

Island Infrastructure Scheme

The Island Infrastructure Scheme aims to provide financial assistance to property developers who plan to develop on designated brownfield sites.

The purpose of the scheme is to trigger the development of brownfield sites that are included on the [Unoccupied Urban Sites Register](#), as published by the Cabinet Office, and unlock their long-term economic potential. Funding under this scheme is made available to bridge the financial gap to enable development on these key urban sites, turning unviable development plans into viable opportunities.

Funding can be sought for residential, retail or leisure, commercial or mixed use developments. An offer of financial assistance will be based on a variety of factors including (but not limited to) location, financial viability,

social benefits, economic benefits, and exchequer benefit. A key element to previous successful applications is that they are not considered financially viable when compared to industry standards, and, that they create the opportunity for long-term economic return to Government.

The first round of the scheme has supported redevelopment schemes on key sites on Lake Road and the former Villiers Hotel site - both in Douglas, together with the former Ocean Castle Hotel site in Port Erin.

The aim of the second round (which is now closed to applications) was to encourage more residential led applications, but applications that demonstrate real economic opportunities and increase the vibrancy and social offering of the Island could be considered.



The Bee Gees Sculpture tells a story at the Villiers development, Douglas

Local Economy Strategy

The Local Economy Strategy 2025 is a long term implementation plan to place town centres first and implement improvement and change at the local level.

The existing strategic plan provides a statutory policy footing for the The Local Economy Strategy 2025 which

conforms with the Area Plan for the East. It promotes best practice from town centre first models aimed at placing town centres first - to revitalise and rejuvenate the Island's towns and villages. Any strategic plan changes will not undermine the implementation of the Local Economic Strategy 2025.



Historic buildings front onto Market Place, Peel

Recognise the policy tool of Comprehensive Treatment Areas

The power to designate land as a Comprehensive Treatment Area (or CTA) is set out in S.4 (1) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1999.

Designation shows a government commitment to devise delivery plans for named CTA's - which provides an important first step in the process for bringing challenging sites back into use.

It brings a sharp focus to the co-ordination of improvements and change which will have significant benefits to the community, the environment and which ultimately allows the optimum development of sites within the existing settlement boundaries.

The Area Plan for the East identifies five CTAs. Feasibility Studies and Comprehensive Treatment Plans have been published for each designated CTA. A CTA is also proposed for West Quay and the Sulby River in Ramsey, within the Draft Area Plan for the North and West. CTA provision may be reviewed as we progress towards an Isle of Man area plan.

Since the adoption of the Area Plan for the East, much work has been undertaken within wider government

to support the commitment to encourage the re-development of our previously developed sites and CTA designation has supported the wider work of the Department for Enterprise to effect positive change.

The redevelopment of the former Villiers Hotel site has now secured planning approval (planning reference 23/01223/B) and work has started. The Riverside Gateway site also has a valid approval (planning reference 24/00310/B). These should help to provide much needed housing, retail and leisure facilities within Douglas.

The CTA approach has served as a useful policy tool and accords with the Government's priorities set out in Our Island Plan – to deliver quality and vibrancy in urban living and town centre regeneration.

Lessons learned from the re-development of sites within CTA's show that the issues are complex, and the preliminary work required to address the challenges extends the timeframes for delivery.

An amendment to S. 4(2)(b) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1999 i – will allow for a specified time period for treatment to increase from 5 years to 10 years.

Currently, there is no strategic policy provision for CTAs - the legislative powers in the Act remove the need. Rather, the planning vehicle for CTA designation is through the Area Plan making process – which ensures a high level of scrutiny when CTA designation is being considered.

Given the current policy provisions within the Act for CTA designation - which has legal primacy - and recent successes in bringing forward plans for redevelopment, it is not proposed to make further policy provision at the strategic level for CTA designation. But this will be considered further throughout the process.



CTA Feasibility Study and Treatment Plan, Ramsey, 2024



Market Square in context, Castletown

Part 3

How the strategic plan can improve
urban communities and centres

Helping to build better places

Plan-making inevitably involves significant evidence gathering, which in itself supports the planning framework, by identifying barriers, bringing key partners and stakeholders together.

The strategic plan is not a delivery plan, but is an essential starting point for delivering better places. It sets the scene for more local area development plans, supplementary policy guidance and is a key material consideration in decision making on planning applications.

The strategic plan alone cannot address all of the challenges in our urban centres and communities but

policy approaches and adjustments, where appropriate, can help to ease some of them. It can facilitate, require and encourage good planning approaches and effect real change at neighbourhood level, site level and in the spaces and linkages in-between.

It is of course the area plan(s) that define development boundaries, highlight areas for comprehensive treatment/improvement and explore detailed development briefs for specific sites. The future aim to draft a single area plan will allow better coordination of building better places and centres across the Island.



Hutchinson Square, Douglas

Focus on centres

The revised strategic plan will have a particular focus on optimising the value and opportunities in existing centres through regeneration, design and placemaking principles and supporting the creation of varied and adaptable centres. Protecting local identity will remain important.

A strong framework which supports consistent decision making can encourage vacant and derelict buildings and sites into productive use and help reverse the decline of local high streets.

Available space can be a challenge - particularly for traditional town uses that require larger footprints such as supermarkets. The future need for additional retail opportunities is explored later in this paper, and also in Paper 2: The pattern and distribution of development.

There is room for better community-led planning. There is ongoing work looking at this and how improvements can be made to create safe and attractive places which are accessible to all.

Small-scale changes can yield significant upgrades over the longer term – taking the initial baby steps fosters greater confidence to bring about change to the environment. These changes are easier to reverse, allowing for trials and tests. It's important to monitor and measure their impact, supporting brave ideas on a small scale as a way to search for future solutions.

Well-planned places are central to well-being and climate goals - there is a societal benefit from ensuring that places are healthier, attractive, welcoming and include the facilities and services people need.



Temporary events activate Market Square, Castletown

A Co-ordinated Approach

The right approach to improve urban communities and centres is to promote seven fundamental principles of placemaking -



1. Clear policies on design and placemaking



2. Collaboration and engagement - with stakeholders and the wider community



3. A shared vision – maximising the opportunities to support a wide range of stakeholder and community interests;



4. Well-designed buildings – that interact positively to their context



5. Great public spaces – easily accessible and connected, safe and vibrant; a shared communal place to dwell



6. Green infrastructure – providing shade and shelter; a valued connection to nature.



7. Creative use of centres – flexibility and adaptability to make best use of existing assets

The following pages explore how these placemaking principles can be applied to a range of different policy contexts and issues.

Design

Design focus

A research publication entitled “[The Value of Urban Design](#)”, commissioned by CABE (Chartered Association of Building Engineers) and DETR (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) examines the value added by good urban design and concludes that good design provides a range of benefits, both direct and indirect.

Direct benefits include higher rental levels, lower maintenance costs, enhanced private sector investment in regeneration and increased public support for development.

Indirect benefits include vibrancy, increased health, wellbeing, safe and accessible communal spaces, whilst retaining a distinctive sense of place, that supports a strong tourism offer. There is much to be said for the benefits

that accrue from building places well. These same benefits apply to the Isle of Man.

With this in mind, the draft plan will review the matters relating to design - for both urban and rural areas.

Policy is the right tool to set out general expectations at strategic level, masterplan level and at individual site level. It can set clear design objectives and principles which aim to achieve well-designed places and buildings that work for the people that use them.

Appropriate policy can influence early scheme design, layout and mix of uses. It impacts directly on community areas, public open space, and green spaces. Matters like community safety and user impact are taken into account. Accordingly, all related policies in the existing strategic plan will be reviewed.

Masterplanning, design briefs and guidance

Masterplanning is key for complex, large or multi-ownership sites, helping ensure they connect well with their wider surroundings.

Development briefs in area plans can highlight early where masterplans are needed, often with added design criteria. These briefs allow a clearer vision and stronger design principles. The new strategic plan can make the most of development opportunities for both sites and communities, and will consider better support for larger, strategic locations. Design statements may also help if used effectively.

The review will assess existing design guidance to see if it covers all key issues and has enough influence. It will consider what should become formal policy, what needs expanding or updating, and whether to use a single design planning policy or a themed approach.

‘Design review’ is well established in nearby jurisdictions but still developing on the Isle of Man. It can help ensure that proposals, especially those involving public funds, are well thought through.

Alongside drafting plan policies, research will explore the benefits of a design review service, what form it might take, local interest and how it could work in practice.

Building styles and building materials (and sensitive use of both)

Current strategic policy on building styles and materials will be reviewed to see where improvements can better support the planning process. Good design, layout and material choices help shape places with lasting value.

Development strongly affects how people feel about an area, often raised during planning applications. Sensitive design that respects or enhances local character should always be the aim. This can include modern methods and climate-aware design, while still delivering high quality, context appropriate outcomes. Achieving this relies on sound guidance, strong design practice and often joint working between planners and developers.

Planning and design guidance should support the creation of places where people want to live, work and spend time. By listening to communities, reviewing policy regularly, and staying open to new approaches, we can ensure today’s developments are valued well into the future.

Vitality and viability of settlements

The updated strategic plan will continue to uphold the vitality and viability of local centres, supporting opportunities for essential and sustainable growth. Where there is a need to limit within certain settlements, this will be clearly stated, and any exceptions to these limits will be specifically identified.

A key objective of the current strategic

plan is to preserve traditional town centre uses within their established boundaries. Such uses typically include retail shops, restaurants, cafés, offices, entertainment venues, and some public services. Ensuring the right policy balance between protecting our centres and allowing traditional town centre uses in locations such as out-of-town areas will be very important.



Lighting creates an evening vibe at Victoria Street, Douglas

Potential for new retail development

The existing strategic policy strongly favours proposals for town centre locations (Strategic Policy 9, Business Policy 10 and Business Policy 5), in accordance with land zones set out within Area Plans.

However, retail may be approved in certain instances, such as for neighbourhood shops, bulky goods on industrial estates, or where the sale of goods is closely tied to their production location. Business Policy 9 sets out the policy provision for retail impact assessments.

As part of the employment land and future needs survey, findings revealed that additional supermarket provision may be needed to meet the economic/job growth aims of Government. These findings will be looked at further as part of the draft plan preparation.

In terms of employment land suitable policy approaches will be drafted to ensure this is located in the right place.

The challenge will be to support growth and the variety of businesses, including retail, without losing the sense of a historic retail core or diminishing the health of the high street.



Shop spill out enlivens Prospect Terrace, Douglas

Heritage and conservation approaches

Our built heritage helps to reveal a sense of ‘time depth’ within an urban environment - and conveys the social and economic values prevalent when built. It’s part of the story of how a part of our environment came into being in the first place, and how it has evolved since. It adds variety and contributes to a ‘sense of place’. Statutory protection is afforded to heritage assets by S. 14 - 19 of the 1999 Act.

The current policy provision is intended to protect our heritage assets and to ensure sympathetic modifications, but there are overlaps in provision.

PPS 1/01 - titled “Policy and Guidance Notes for the Conservation of the Historic Environment of the Isle of Man” sets out heritage guidance. The PPS 1/01 guidance was drafted in 2001. Subsequent to this, a number of policies were carried forward into the Strategic Plan 2007, as follows -



Environment Policies 30 - 33 make policy provision for protected buildings;



Environment Policies 36 - 39 make policy provision for conservation areas;



Environment Policy 33 sets out the policy to promote the use of traditional building materials; and



Environment Policies 40 - 41 make policy provision for archaeology.

Area specific policy provision is set out within Area Plans.

It is proposed to review PPS 1/01 against the current heritage policies within the strategic plan – to reduce duplication and provide greater clarity, where appropriate.

Public spaces and placemaking

The benefits of delivering improvements to public realm are evident on the Island. Parliament Street in Ramsey has benefited from improvements in recent years. Another example is North Quay - where public realm improvements have led to business investment in private properties adjacent to the Quay. The pedestrianisation scheme in this location has been a notable success.

Cabinet Office is keen to foster better working relationships to support improvements to public realm and spaces, which will hopefully lead to greater confidence in bringing forward actual change and delivery of improvements on a more measurable scale in the future.

To support this, Cabinet Office is working on an *'Introduction to Public Spaces'* (to be published late in the year)- which aims to inform, signpost and educate stakeholders on the options available to bring forward change and explore the early steps of placemaking. The work has been designed to complement the ongoing improvements to the built environment led in part by the Built Environment Reform Program over the past two years.

'Introduction to Public Spaces' makes a confident start at linking the goal of building better places, with change on the ground and exploring how to get there. It is this supporting policy guidance that forms the golden thread between strategy (like the strategic plan and area plans) with practical change everyone can see and experience.

In terms of placemaking, there is growing literature on placemaking in practice which attempts to identify the methods and ways to deliver well designed places. At its heart is community engagement and understanding people's different experiences.

Effective placemaking draws on two key elements;

Commonality - between people, shared places and spaces and infrastructure. Together these elements represent "community".

Difference – exploring how people living close together experience 'place' in different ways. This adds to the meaning of 'community' and an appreciation of it is integral to people-centred places.

Active travel and walkability

Active travel, such as walking and cycling, plays a significant role in strengthening urban communities. A walkable neighbourhood is one where daily needs, such as shops, schools, parks and public transport, are within easy and safe walking or cycling distance, supported by well-connected pathways, low traffic speeds, and accessible public spaces. These environments encourage more face-to-face interactions among residents, enhancing social cohesion and a sense of belonging. People are more likely to greet neighbours, support local businesses, and engage in community activities when streets prioritise pedestrians and cyclists

over cars. Research shows that active travel can boost the local economy, as people on foot or by bike tend to visit shops more frequently and spend more over time than those who drive. Moreover, reduced traffic and improved public spaces contribute to a safer and more pleasant environment, encouraging people of all ages to spend time outdoors and build stronger community ties.

More on active travel policies and their place in the Strategic Plan can be found in Paper 5 - Our Climate Responsibilities on page 54 (Part 4, Setting out the policy approaches, Policy Goal 6 - The provision of active travel infrastructure).



Parliament Street, Ramsey

Parking standards

The current focus of town centre living provides opportunities to reduce car dependency and promote more sustainable and active modes of travel. This brings many benefits, including greater demand for public transport, reduced air pollution, increased health and fitness and social connection.

Similarly, trends for remote working are affecting the requirement for car parking in relation to employment uses. The need for car parking in our urban centres is changing.

Current parking standards set out in Appendix 7 of the Strategic Plan are quite prescriptive and don't take into account different contexts. It is proposed to review the parking standards as part of the strategic plan review to better reflect the need for car parking in different development contexts, emerging technologies such as EV charging points, and changes to employment trends. Effective parking management can be an important tool in achieving these goals.



Historic terraced housing layout at Primrose Avenue, Douglas

Clarity of terms

In the context of *'urban communities'*, the existing strategic plan uses the terms *'built environment'*, *'design'*, *'centres'* and *'town centres'* throughout its early chapters. The new strategic plan review provides an opportunity to review terms and to incorporate all these references, including specific policy wordings related to urban areas and centres.

There is some duplication of policies in the current plan and this will be investigated to ensure that any cross references are complimentary and there is no ambiguity. The glossary of terms will also be reviewed and expanded.



Bridge above Mona Terrace in Douglas

Conclusion

The review of the strategic plan will place greater focus on development within our existing settlements – whether that be through wholesale regeneration of an area, adaptation and modification to bring buildings back into use or the creation of better places and spaces. This approach aligns with the Local Economy Strategy and the wider work of the Department for Enterprise – and aims to support economic prosperity and resilience in changing times.

There are a number of approaches that can be adopted – which respond to the scale of the intervention required and the means available to achieve it.

The core element running through the review of urban policies is to optimise the available opportunities for all stakeholders and the public. Promoting greater involvement of the community will bring its challenges, but the rewards will be much greater and longer lasting.

Change is inevitable, but we can embrace it by being proactive. To preserve what we cherish, we must adapt our ways, framing change as an opportunity to respect and improve our communities. By understanding what people value about their towns and villages through participation, we can ensure that change honours these values. Planning policy is the first step.

Cabinet Office

Urban Communities and Centres

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