

Western Harbour

A local residents perspective



A Community-Focused Alternative

The redevelopment of Western Harbour presents a significant opportunity for Bristol to enhance its waterfront, restore its historical character, and create a thriving and well-integrated community. However, the current draft master plan is deeply disappointing. Despite initial hopes that the proposal would reflect the input of local residents and take a sensitive approach to development, it instead prioritizes high-density housing blocks that fail to respect the area's heritage or address pressing infrastructure challenges.

Rather than embracing the site's rich maritime history and distinctive urban landscape, the proposed development imposes oversized high-rises that are entirely out of scale with the surrounding buildings. These tower blocks would dominate the skyline, obscure iconic views from Clifton and Ashton Court, and sever Hotwells from the waterfront. In addition, the plan fails to integrate with or improve the existing road network, instead reinforcing outdated infrastructure that isolates communities and prioritizes traffic over pedestrian-friendly urban design.

A more thoughtful and ambitious vision is needed—one that balances housing with public spaces, respects Bristol's historic fabric, and improves connectivity while fostering a genuine sense of place. This alternative proposal seeks to outline a more considered approach to the redevelopment of Western Harbour, emphasizing high-quality urban planning, restoration of historic infrastructure, and the creation of meaningful public spaces.



A Need for Thoughtful Urban Design

There is a real opportunity to redesign one of Bristol's most iconic locations and restore this neighbourhood so the local community is proud and the whole city benefits. This is a real opportunity to right the wrongs of the 1960's urban planning that devastated one of the most vibrant and historic locations in Bristol. There is ample space for a mix of housing, commercial property and public spaces with a much improved transport infrastructure

One of the most glaring issues with the current proposal is its reliance on large, uniform blocks of flats that lack any connection to Bristol's architectural heritage. Instead of an impersonal high-rise development, Western Harbour should feature a diverse mix of housing that integrates seamlessly with existing neighbourhoods. Warehouse-style buildings and terraced housing would complement the historic character of the area far better than the proposed high-rises, ensuring that new developments feel like a natural extension of the city rather than an imposed and disconnected housing estate.

The existing A-Bond warehouse's present a particularly valuable opportunity to creatively inform the architectural design in a new warehouse district. The nearby terraced housing can inspire modern equivalents that complement the existing housing, as has been successfully done locally already. New public spaces offer a rare opportunity for new unique landmark buildings, civic squares and parks.

Instead of one developer the new development should be split into new distinct districts and tackled by a roster of smaller developers spreading the risk and making a more competitive tendering process, and eventually creating a more interesting mixed urban design. A vibrant mixed-use space, incorporating residential, commercial, and community functions. Such an approach would not only preserve an important part of Bristol's industrial history but also create an anchor for a lively, diverse neighbourhood.



Reimagining Infrastructure and Connectivity

For Western Harbour to succeed as a community-focused development, its transport infrastructure must be reimagined. The current road network divides neighbourhoods and prioritises high-speed traffic, negatively impacting residents, pedestrians, and cyclists. The oversized dual carriageway should be replaced with a more human-scale design that slows traffic and promotes walkability.

I propose the removal of Plimsoll Bridge and Brunel Way, alongside restoring the historic Ashton Avenue Bridge as a double-decker crossing, with the upper level dedicated to road traffic. A new bascule bridge will be an integral part of the design, helping traffic flow from the Portway, and up to Clifton via Joy and Granby hills. Additionally, two new crossroad junctions will help slow traffic throughout Hotwells while optimising journey times.

The existing dual carriageway is a dysfunctional outdated design. It does not increase traffic flow as this is limited by the size of the roads it connects to, which are all single lane. During busy periods, it creates tailbacks, while at quiet times it encourages faster driving. Currently, the road network funnels traffic through Hotwells and Coronation Road, rather than the more suitable Cumberland Road, and the one-way system turns Hotwells into a roundabout, further isolating the community. Replacing this with a more efficient, human-scale road network will create a better flow and reduce the negative impacts on the local community.

Shifting away from car-dominated planning would free up space for housing and green areas, creating a more livable, sustainable neighbourhood.

Restoring traffic flow over Ashton Avenue Bridge and implementing the proposed changes will reduce journey times during rush hour, make all the roads in Hotwells safer, more pedestrian-friendly, and create a more welcoming community space.



Creating Meaningful Public Spaces

A successful redevelopment must go beyond simply preserving existing green spaces—it should actively create new public parks, civic squares, and leisure areas that serve both residents and visitors. Unfortunately, the current master plan lacks a clear vision for these vital community spaces. Simply designating waterfront paths as public areas is not genuine city planning; it is a superficial gesture that fails to deliver the social and environmental benefits of well-designed public spaces. Saying that cafe or shops can be anywhere is really saying there has not been any thought about where it would be best to plan for them to be.

Instead, new public squares and parks should be strategically located to enhance connectivity and encourage social interaction. The removal of the Plimsoll Bridge, would open up land for new public spaces both north and south of its former location. These areas could be transformed into vibrant plazas, parks, and waterfront promenades, providing much-needed gathering spaces for the community.

New shopping streets should be planned to connect public spaces and provide local services as well as attracting people from the wider Bristol area. The best locations should be chosen for cafes and restaurants to create a vibrant new hospitality area.

In my design I have created a small amphitheatre with a maritime themed tower that could host small performances with the clifton suspension bridge as the backdrop. I have also placed two circular landmark buildings that I imagine as much needed public spaces. Maybe a swimming pool which is much needed since the jacobs wells pool has been closed all my life and a community centre seeing as the hope centre no longer serves this purpose.



Restoring and Celebrating Bristol's Heritage

Western Harbour is a historically significant location, yet the current redevelopment plan makes little effort to preserve or celebrate its past. Instead of designs influenced by existing buildings and structures, the proposal erases much of the area's heritage in favour of generic modern developments.

A more sensitive approach would involve the full restoration of the Ashton Avenue Bridge, allowing it to once again serve as a key transport link into Bristol. The restoration of Brunel's lock gate bridge for cyclists and pedestrians could link two new civic spaces restoring this part of the harbour to how it was conceived, and allowing the public to enjoy the best view of the Clifton suspension bridge and up the Avon gorge. Restoring the streets that were lost on the Hotwells side of harbour, slowing the traffic and using my proposed road layout would revitalise the remaining historic housing in Hotwells. Dowry Square and Hotwells Road in particular would benefit hugely. By moving the traffic away from the waterfront and removing the 1960's fencing and restoring the historic harbour, it could be easily accessed and enjoyed once again.

Long-term plans could be developed for the restoration of the Rocks Railway and the terraced gardens beneath the Avon Gorge Hotel connecting Clifton with the harbour once more.

These elements would not only enhance the character of the area but also serve as unique attractions that draw visitors and celebrate Bristol's engineering and industrial history.

The damage caused by 1960s town planning decisions, which replaced vibrant historic neighbourhoods with car-centric infrastructure, should be reversed where possible. Looking at historical photographs of the area makes it clear that Western Harbour was once a thriving, integrated part of the city. A well-planned redevelopment should seek to restore that lost connection rather than further erode it.



A Balanced Approach to Housing Density

High-density housing is a necessity in modern cities, but it must be done well. Western Harbour is not a city-center overflow site, nor should it become a uniform high-rise estate. Given its prime location, it has the potential to be an eclectic, well-designed neighbourhood that reflects the needs of the local community while still accommodating a high population density.

Rather than relying solely on one- and two-bedroom flats, a more diverse mix of housing should be introduced, including townhouses, larger family homes, and warehouse-style apartments. This would create a more varied and inclusive community, rather than a transient population of renters in identikit high-rise blocks.

The A-Bond warehouse conversion with additional modern warehouse style apartments is a particularly promising opportunity, offering the potential for spacious, characterful living spaces. Thoughtfully designed modern architectural buildings that are sympathetic to the scale density and layout of the local housing like this can provide unique homes while preserving the architectural heritage of the area.

I calculate that my proposal will allow for far more quality high value housing and commercial spaces than the current proposal and therefore should be a much more commercially viable proposal.

Total number of property in proposal

- Houses 145
- Apartments 475
- Commercial 85



Conclusion: A Call for a Better Master Plan

The redevelopment of Western Harbour should be a landmark opportunity for Bristol—a chance to create a world-class waterfront district that enhances the city's livability, connectivity, and heritage. However, the current master plan falls far short of this potential. By prioritizing high-rise housing over thoughtful urban design, it risks becoming yet another poorly conceived development that fails to serve the needs of the community.

A more ambitious and community-focused plan should:

- Remove the dual carriageway and redesign the transport network to support walkability and local connectivity.
- Create genuine new public spaces rather than simply preserving existing paths and parks.
- Develop a mix of housing types that respect and integrate with the historic surroundings.
- Restore key heritage assets, such as the Ashton Avenue Bridge and the harbourside.
- Convert and repurpose historic buildings like the A-Bond warehouse into high-quality housing.
- Ensure that the development reflects the needs and character of Bristol, rather than catering purely to developers' interests.

Western Harbour has the potential to become a vibrant and historic waterfront district. However, for this to happen, the master plan must be fundamentally rethought. Bristol deserves better. Let's get it right.