

Investing in Inverness- creating a more walkable and prosperous city centre (No. 061)

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Abstract

Context

Inverness is the 'capital of the Highlands' in Scotland. Despite its rural location, the city centre had been blighted for years by problems of congestion, vehicles travelling at inappropriate speed, noise and air pollution and a poor social environment. Local businesses, the council and other organisations were determined to improve the situation.

Aim

This paper provides details of the community street audit which Living Streets carried out in 2005 along Church Street, the oldest street in the city and the work that was carried out on Church Street as part of the far wider city centre streetscape work over a 4 year period.

Methodology

The paper describes how the Living Streets Community Street Audit involved local businesses, local residents, the local council, police and other key local organisations, identifying key priorities for improvement, including footway renewal, new signage and facilities, wynd/lane improvements, better crossing facilities, public space/art and traffic management. It will demonstrate the changes in the city centre, designed by Land Use Consulting, through a series of before and after images and identify the key benefits enjoyed by local businesses and residents.

Results

The re-development work, was completed in summer 2009, has delivered many of the priorities the street audit identified, creating a more pedestrian friendly environment and improved traffic movement, new and widened pavements, new civic areas, new street surfaces, new lighting, street furniture and themed public artwork, designed by local primary school pupils. New street cafes are now appearing and there are also signs of investment being made to buildings in the Old Town.

Conclusions

The main conclusions will be to demonstrate how investment in streetscape and traffic management to encourage walking and sojourning can potentially revitalise a street and city centre, attract more people to the area and support the local economy.

Biography

Keith Irving leads the Living Streets team in Scotland and their community engagement and campaigning work. He has an MSc in transport planning and engineering and previously worked as a senior researcher in the Scottish Parliament, focusing on environment and health issues, as a travel plan officer and as an English teacher in Japan.

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Introduction

Inverness is the 'capital of the Highlands' in Scotland. Despite its rural location, the city centre had been blighted for years by problems of congestion, vehicles travelling at inappropriate speed, noise and air pollution and a poor social environment. Local businesses, the council and other organisations were determined to improve the situation. During 2006-2009, nearly £6m has been invested in the Inverness city centre streetscape and traffic management programme. A Community Street Audit was carried out on Church Street in Inverness' historic core by Living Streets and this paper highlights how the City Centre Streetscape work has improved Church Street, delivering many of the priorities identified in the street audit. The City Centre Streetscape project was funded by Highland Council, Inverness Common Good Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Government and Scottish Arts Council and designed by Land Use Consulting.

The Community Street Audit

Community Street Audits are a method for evaluating the quality of public space – streets, housing estates, town centres, parks and squares – from the point of view of the people who use it rather than those who manage it.

For many people, when they think about how public space might be improved, the starting point is to demand clean pavements and clean streets. While these are very important if we are to get around safely and easily on foot, public space works best if it is designed and maintained to allow for more than just walking. When streets are places to meet friends and neighbours, to shop, to talk, to play and to watch the world go by, they start to contribute more to local communities. Vibrant streets create safer neighbourhoods, less fear of crime and a healthier environment. They ensure that everyone can get around and can help to include everyone in public life. Community Street Audits involve working with groups of stakeholders, including local residents and businesses, to identify improvements which will create a safe, attractive and enjoyable environment for all users. (For more information, please go to www.livingstreets.org.uk/expert-help).

The Church Street CSA was carried out on 1st September 2005 as part of a series of 10 CSAs around Scotland, supported by Paths for All. It was organised in conjunction with Inverness City Partnership and attended by:

Brian Philip	City of Inverness Traders Association
Jock Shaw	Inverness City Centre Management
Douglas Wynd	Safeinverness (ICCM)
Pat Hayden	Crown Community Council
Chris Claridge	The Highland Council
Hector Macdonald	Inverness Civic Trust
Shane Rodger	Inverness Architectural Association
Alison Tanner	Inverness City Heritage Trust
Frances Campbell	Inverness Access Panel
Jim Monro	Old High Church
Derek Mitchell	Northern Constabulary
Susan Szymborski	Step It Up Highland

Linda Brown
Jackie Cuddy
Sandy Cook

Paths for All
Eastgate Shopping Centre (part of audit)
Living Streets

The area audited was the full length of Church Street, from Bridge Street to Friars Lane:

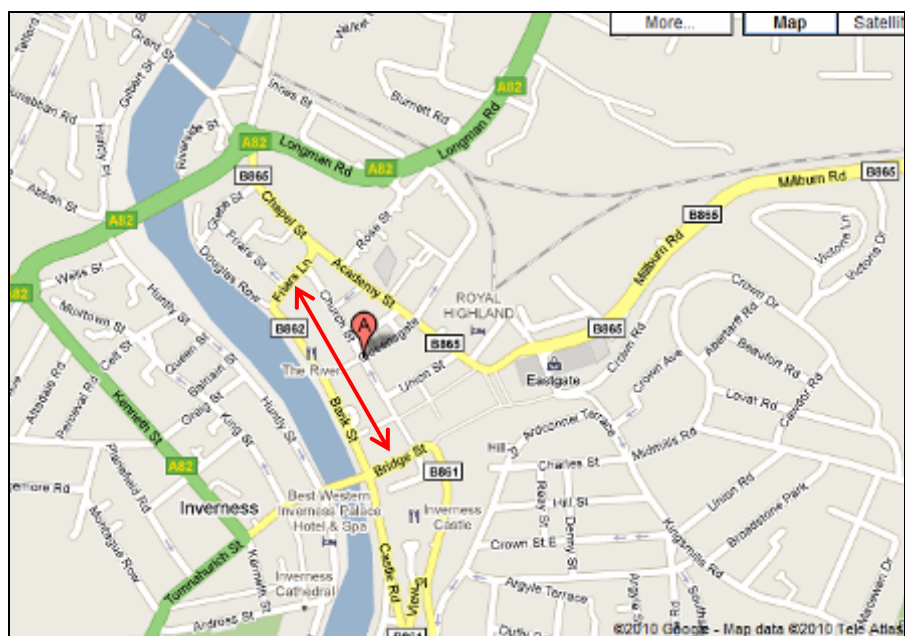
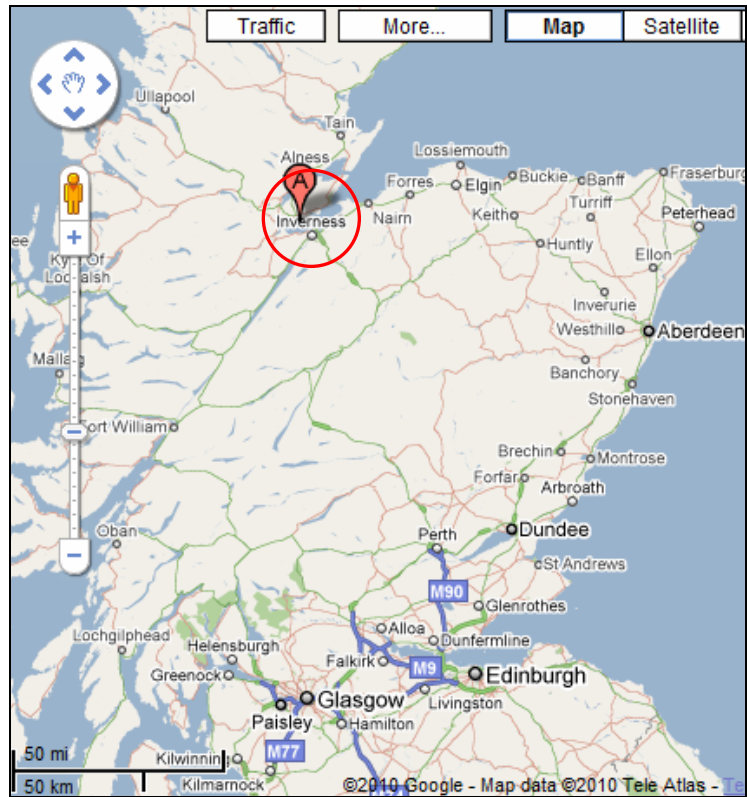


Figure 1: Location Maps of Church Street, Inverness

Church Street is the oldest street in the city centre. It is centrally located, close to the pedestrianised High Street and Riverside and, at the time, was included in a number of local initiatives and programmes:

- Inverness Local Plan had identified Church Street as part of a proposal to extend pedestrian priority in the City Centre, including street improvements. A set of traffic management and streetscape proposals were drawn up and consultation had taken place. As a result of the consultation, plans no longer included significant pedestrianisation.
- Inverness City Partnership was leading on the Church Street project and also sought to strengthen links between Church Street, Castle Wynd and the Riverside.
- Inverness City Partnership, Inverness and Nairn Enterprise, City of Inverness Traders Association and Inverness City Centre Management were considering an Action Plan for enhancement of the 'Old Town' area and to promote its attractions as part of Highland 2007, a year-long celebration of Highland culture.

Church Street is a busy street with a range of shops, restaurants, offices and other commercial uses, a variety of independent traders and an access to the Victorian Market. It also has residential property above some ground floor uses. It occupies a strategic location close to High Street, Riverside, Bus and Rail stations and the Castle area. There are variable pedestrian flows, generally becoming busier towards the south end. The street operated as a major traffic distributor and had heavy flows of cars, buses and servicing vehicles.

Priorities identified by Community Street Audit

The CSA identified the following priorities: Footway Renewal, Signage and Facilities, Wynd/Lane Improvements, Crossings, Public space and Art, Traffic Management (images are provided below to demonstrate the impact of the city centre streetscape work in Church Street).

Footway Renewal

Footway surfaces needed improvement along the length of Church Street, including quality and unity of materials, excessive crossfalls, replacement of central drainage gullies, absence of dropped kerbs and tactile paving at desire line crossing points or dropped kerbs were offset. Footway obstructions, whether permanent (bollards, guardrails, bins) or temporary (parked cars, advertising boards), were also a major hazard for people on foot.

Signage and Facilities

Removal of badly sited/irrelevant signage to reduce clutter, addition of maps or street directories to aid visitors, replacement of lighting with pedestrian scale lighting and more cycle parking.



Figure 2: Before. Poor quality signage creating clutter



Figure 3: After. Clear signage (and pedestrian scale white lighting visible in distance)

Wynd/Lane Improvements

The Audit recommended a review of each Wynd off Church Street and action with regard to cleanliness, obstructions to movement, safety, quality of lighting and evidence of anti-social behaviour.



Figure 4: Before. Poor quality lane (materials, surface, obstructions)

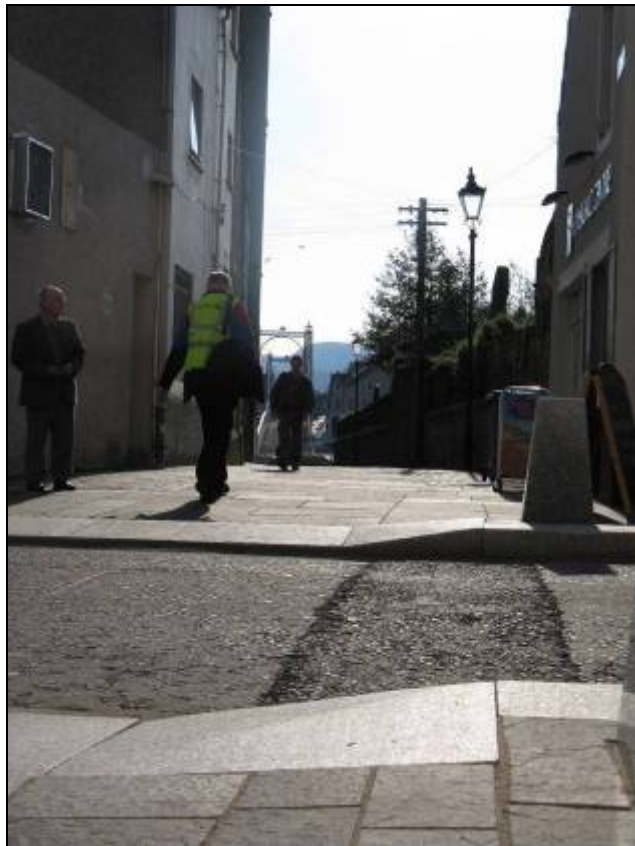


Figure 5: After. Improved surface, removal of obstructions from centre and improvement of lighting (plus creation of desire line crossing point)

Crossings

In the context of the overall Inverness City Centre Project, the audit argued for improvements to:

- Waiting time, total crossing time and time allocated for green man phase at traffic lights
- Directness of crossing routes, particularly at Bridge Street
- Use of speed tables to provide a level surface crossing route at Bridge Street crossing and on Church Street between Bridge Street and Queensgate/Fraser Street and at School Lane and Friars Lane.



Figure 6: Before. Difficult to cross, poor visibility, no dropped kerbs



Figure 7: After. Informal crossing as well as formal dropped kerb crossing point, marked with tactile paving (plus kerb build outs providing delineated parking)

Public Space and Art

The audit recognised that successful hanging baskets are already in place but could be supplemented by introduction of street trees and greenery, art and other features. Improvement of the seating area at Abertarff House (built in 1593, the oldest house in Inverness) to include a footway build out, would create a focal point with banners and art work to attract people along Church Street. Creation of seating and social areas would also benefit Bridge Street and Friars Lane entrances and at the Queensgate/Fraser Street junction.



Figure 8: Before. Poor quality clutter at Abertaff House, Inverness' oldest house.



Figure 9: After. Improved materials and public seating

Traffic Management

The audit acknowledged that solutions for Church Street couldn't be seen in isolation, but as part of the wider approach to Inverness City Centre. The following priorities were identified:

- 20 mph restriction on traffic
- Removal of through traffic: cars, vans and HGVs
- Maintain access for buses, taxis and disabled vehicles but increase allocation of road space to pedestrians

- More effective enforcement of illegal parking by cars and delivery vans. While deliveries are essential for traders, unlimited access was resulting in illegal parking and blocking of street and pavements.
- Noise and air pollution increased by queuing traffic, especially buses.
- Consider excluding non-essential buses from the street and use of smaller vehicles, the extension of footways to allow improved waiting areas, with seating and timetable information



Figure 10: Before. Traffic management and illegal parking issues



Figure 11: After. Extended pedestrianised area and greening of street (in summer)

Results of Streetscape Work

Land Use Consultants (LUC) designed and administered the Inverness City Centre Streetscape scheme from 2006 to its completion in 2009. The principal streets concerned were Union Street, Church Street, Queensgate, Stephens Brae, Inglis Street, Bridge Street, Baron Taylor's Street,

Drummond Street, Lombard Street and Ness Walk and a number of key lanes/wyndes. Project funders were The Highland Council, Inverness Common Good Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Government and Scottish Arts Council.

The re-development work of Church Street, completed in June 2009, has delivered many of the priorities the CSA identified, creating a more pedestrian friendly environment and improved traffic movement.

- Newly surfaced and widened footways incorporating Caithness flag stones, granite paving blocks, cubes and kerbs, with high attention to detail, for example of gulley drainage
- New traffic management with narrowing the carriageway, speed tables and a reversal of the one-way route to reduce through (rat-run) traffic
- New civic areas created by footway extension and use of raised table, for example at Abertaff House. (see Figure 20). This space has already been closed off to traffic on several occasions to allow public events to take place.
- Reduced parking while maintaining delivery access
- New informal crossing points with dropped kerbs and tactile paving
- New pedestrian scale white lighting along street and wyndes/lanes,
- Cycle parking provided on footway extensions
- Street furniture including seating provided
- Parking bays surfaced with stone not asphalt to further expand perception of pedestrian space
- Themed public artwork with pupils from the local Cauldeen Primary School involved in designing some of the street artwork. A temporary public art event happened in September, 2006 when 14 Highland artists engaged the local community/visitors in a conversation about the city centre – past, present and future- and many events have happened since.
- 20mph limit is being introduced across many streets of the city centre, including Church Street.

Impact

Unfortunately, footfall and vacancy figures are not available which is why this paper focuses on the visual changes. Nonetheless, it is clear that new street cafes are now appearing on the expanded footway, vacant units have been brought back into use and there are also signs of investment being made to buildings in the Old Town. Several services have also been renewed during the construction period including a major water mains upgrade.

The Streetscape Project won the Department for Transport Manual for Streets Award at the prestigious Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT) Awards in June 2010. It was recognised as succeeding in achieving its original objectives of improving the attractiveness of the City Centre as a distinctive place, improving the pedestrian environment, and maintaining safe access and movement throughout the centre. The scheme has created an environment which is inclusive of all users and has achieved a good balance between the 'movement' function and the 'place' function.

Challenges

As might be anticipated when carrying out work on the oldest street in the city, there were challenges such as uncharted utilities. The construction period lasted 2 years which created a lot of significant disruption for local businesses and the community. There is an ongoing challenge for Inverness City Centre facing competition from major out of town retail development to the East of the City. However, as the images below demonstrate, the Streetscape work has undoubtedly helped improve the environment to support the local economy.



Figure 12: Before. Vacant shop and poorly located information board.



Figure 13: After. Shop in use and facilities (seat, bin, cycle parking moved onto kerb built out area (some remaining construction-related clutter)).



Figure 14: After: Well located, attractive information board

Next steps and conclusions

The key conclusions from the streetscape work on Church Street are:

- Congratulations to everyone involved in delivering a successful scheme, as demonstrated in the final images below.
- This demonstrates how a Community Street Audit, bringing in local residents, businesses, public agencies such as police, can help the council identify the improvements that will work
- A CSA helps provide a compromise between competing uses and users of a street.
- Investment in the public realm is essential to support the local businesses, as well as allow the history of the buildings and location to be perceived by residents and visitors.
- With at least 4 years of consultation, planning, design and construction involved in just one street, a long term perspective is essential

The main exit at Inverness Rail Station has already been identified as a future priority by the council- the images below demonstrate the poor nature of the current gateway to the city- but finding funding will be extremely challenging.



Figure 15: Arrival at Inverness Rail station- potential for future development



Figure 14: Current arrival at Inverness Rail station- potential for future public realm work

In conclusion, the first permanent public art commission was the installation Three Virtues by Lead Artist, Matt Baker. Local businesses & residents were involved in a creative dialogue to identify three new virtues for Inverness. Perseverance, Open-Heartedness and Insight were chosen and it's clear these virtues also apply to the work investing in Church Street and Inverness City Centre.



Figure 16: Virtue: Perseverance



Figure 17: Virtue: Insight



Figure 18: Virtue: Open-heartedness



Figure 19: Before: heavy through traffic, queuing vehicles and poor quality public realm



Figure 20: After: spacious, high quality public realm