1.0 Background

The Planning Committee, at their meeting on 18 January 2001, considered a draft Design Brief for 17-19 Justice Mill Lane. Whilst endorsing the draft Brief, the Committee also instructed that a more detailed study be carried out covering a wider area of the City Centre to the north of Justice Mill Lane, emphasising and promoting linkages throughout that area. To the north, uncertainty concerning the future of Chapel Street Car Park, as reported to the Resources Management Committee on 6 February 2001, has prompted its inclusion in the wider Study area.

The Study area is defined by a need to assess particular problem areas in the west of the City Centre. These include Union Row, Chapel Street Car Park, and Langstane Place.

The Strategy has been formed on the inherent strengths and competitive attributes of Aberdeen, both architectural and cultural, and the opportunities to build these into a public realm and urban form of the highest international standards. It identifies key projects in the development of a masterplan for the City Centre. Whilst the West End is not a specific, strategic project, it plays such a crucial role in the vibrancy and vitality of the City that early action is merited.

The Aberdeen Urban Realm Strategy includes several generic strategies, most notably concerning improving connectivity and accessibility in the City Centre. The Collegiate Aberdeen project brings to the fore the wealth of public spaces in the City Centre which are presently hidden or poor in environmental quality. A number of such areas exist in the West End.

Thus, the West End Study area is a zone of opportunity. The Study identifies initial ideas and concepts that form the basis for further discussion and development in exploring that opportunity.
2.0 Study Boundary

It is not intended that this Study cover the whole West End, rather it concentrates on an area which currently presents several issues. Many of the streets surrounding the Study area (Huntly Street, Victoria Street and Thistle Street) have their own distinct character and uses contributing to their success. The boundary is defined by a need to assess particular problem areas including Langstane Kirk, Union Row Car Park, Chapel Street Car Park, Justice Mill Lane and links to Union Street. Justice Mill Lane and Langstane Place form the boundary to the south, Rose Street to the west and Huntly Street to the north and east. The study area includes Chapel Street, Summer Street and the western extreme of Union Street.
3.0 Introduction

The Study area is a transitional zone between the business orientated Harlaw area and the more retail concentrated City Centre. The area currently offers a variety of uses, such as retail, including speciality shops, housing, business and entertainment.

Whilst the policy of bringing residents back to the City Centre has succeeded beyond reasonable expectation, the West End's diversity and vitality is diminishing as a result. In recent years, the resident population may have steadily increased, but employment in the area, and the City Centre generally, has been in decline.

Housing does bring new people into the City, which is welcome, but the economic impacts of this in the City Centre can be limited. After bringing much needed regeneration, it is essential to balance residential areas with a mix of uses to ensure continued vitality. Few recent housing developments have incorporated "live" frontages at street level resulting in façades that offer little daily vibrancy.

Large areas of surface car parking are uneconomic and unsightly users of space. Significant new development is in danger of being stifled through fragmentation of wider opportunities by housing of poor architectural quality.

The existing underused multi-storey car park on Chapel Street is reaching the end of its useful economic life, with a reduced capacity replacement considered appropriate.

Throughout the Study area there are a number of points of conflict between pedestrians and vehicular traffic. Many pavements are narrow and create an inhospitable environment for comfortable pedestrian use, particularly along the north side of Union Street.

Satisfactory pedestrian provision between Justice Mill Lane, Langstane Place and Union Street is virtually non-existent and improved links would considerably enhance the prospects for the area.

This Study investigates ideas for, and possible methods of, reinvigorating the West End with the following key objectives:

- Maintaining and enhancing the vitality, vibrancy and viability of the West End;
- Creating better urban spaces for residents, employees and visitors;
- Maximising opportunity for development.

4.0 Policy

The Study area is subject to a number of Local Plan policies. In the adopted Local Plan (September 1991) a small section to the north west of the study area is zoned residential. This only covers Thistle Court and the open space surrounding it. To the south, on Union Street itself, the Central Shopping Zone and the Union Street Frontages policy protect the retail uses but also allow for a mix of other complementary uses. The majority of the study area is covered by the M2 Central Business District policy that has a presumption in favour of retaining and developing commercial uses.

The adopted Local Plan is currently under review. A Draft and Finalised Aberdeen City Local Plan have been produced and a further Finalised version is due to be published early in 2002. The policies proposed in the emerging Local Plan are similar to those in the adopted Plan. The residential area remains at Thistle Court, as does the designation of a Central Shopping Zone along Union Street. The Union Street Frontages policy continues to protect the retail element along Union Street. It is proposed to cover the remainder of the area by a revised policy to help facilitate the development of this area as a modern business location. It is also proposed that a number of opportunity sites as outlined in this Study will be identified in the emerging Local Plan.
The Local Transport Strategy for Aberdeen identifies the long-term vision to encourage a culture where walking accounts for a substantial proportion of all trips and is regarded as the norm for travelling short distances. Policies are identified within the strategy to encourage "walkable neighbourhoods".

5.0 Issues

5.1 Chapel Street car park, designed and built in the 1970s, has a current capacity of 505 spaces. The building is approaching the end of its useful economic life with major structural work required to enable its continued use. The car park currently operates at around 50% capacity and it may be appropriate to allow a reduction in the number of public car parking spaces to around 360.

5.2 Many of the pavements throughout the Study area generally are quite narrow and result in restricted pedestrian movement. Lack of width creates discomfort and discourages pedestrians from lingering. The West End area is typified by vehicular dominance.

5.3 A number of sites in the West End are identified as opportunity sites in the Local Plan. These include large areas of surface car parking contributing to the majority of undeveloped ground coverage in the West End. Surface car parking, an uneconomic use of space, does not make a positive contribution to the urban streetscape.

5.4 Justice Mill Lane has presented several issues, largely concerning the number of licensed premises and their associated customers. Conflict between patrons and road users regularly arises, with narrow footpaths contributing to this. Similarly, conflict exists between patrons and residents in the area. Pedestrian provision, allowing people to safely disperse in the early hours when licensed premises close, is inadequate.

5.5 Housing is increasing in the area, with fewer diverse uses than may be expected in a City Centre location. Recent housing developments do not mirror the traditional city centre tenement, tending to concentrate access to the rear via a car park, rather than punctuate façades with entrances.

5.6 Business uses are relocating to sites outwith the City Centre. This may be due to the lack of the lack of modern office facilities: many businesses occupy existing offices located within historic buildings not readily adaptable to 21st century requirements.

5.7 Langstane Kirk is a major landmark in the City Centre. Although it lies on the periphery of this study area, it is an essential component in the West End. A Category "B" listed building, the Kirk is no longer in ecclesiastical use. Planning consent was refused in June 2001 for conversion to a combined public house and nightclub. New uses must be sought for this building.

6.0 Initial Ideas

The ideas identified in this section should not be interpreted as finalised proposals. Rather they are included as a framework for discussion and offer possible solutions to perceived current problems.

6.1 General

The City Centre has perhaps now reached a stage where the assumption that flats represent the only development option should be questioned. At present, sites that are available for development are disjointed, but this Study attempts to demonstrate how they could be successfully linked together and integrated within the existing business network of the surrounding area. It is suggested that the West End zone to the north of Union Street be re-designated in the emerging Local Plan. This would help facilitate the promotion of the area as the Chapel Street Business Development Zone in order
to encourage more and diverse modern business uses complementary to existing retail and residential uses.

6.2 Urban Realm

The Urban Realm Strategy identifies a collegiate network of pedestrian spaces as one of the strategic projects that will enhance the quality of the public realm. The Collegiate Aberdeen proposal recognises the inherent and intricate qualities of Aberdeen’s public spaces. These are enhanced areas linked to provide a network of spaces for the public life of the City. Collegiate Aberdeen is a project that will have an impact on the entire City Centre, as well as the immediate environment of the individual spaces. By bringing these spaces to life, another layer will be added to the richness of the City Centre. Aberdeen can then progress to being a "walkable" city with inviting spaces of high quality.

6.3 Architecture and Urban Design

The built environment in the City Centre must to be of high quality capable of providing a major attraction for forward investment. Good architecture raises company profile and enhances corporate identity. Good building design, avoiding the pastiche of grey mock-granite and dry-dash roughcast, has a key role to play in the success of businesses and industries. This is particularly relevant in the West End, where high quality, innovative contemporary architecture must be produced to encourage meaningful business development in the area.

6.4 Chapel Street Car Park

The existing car park operates at a capacity of 50-60%, suggesting a capacity of around 360 spaces would be appropriate to meet daily demand. Recent observations during the Christmas and New Year period indicate the level of occupancy during peak demand to be at or around 60%. These observations indicate that at present an over-provision exists. Should the Chapel Street Car Park be reduced in number it will not represent a loss in the total number of public parking spaces in the area.

The reduction of parking for Chapel Street relates to the balance of parking across the City Centre that will be provided collectively (1000 spaces) from the Denburn, Justice Mill Lane and Chapel Street car parks. It may be appropriate to re-evaluate this figure if other developments in the area alter the parking profile in any significant way.

If the site is considered for redevelopment, options for parking include the introduction of an underground facility. Such a solution could hide what is generally considered to be an undesirable building type and offer an opportunity for maximising development above ground. Issues such as security, lighting and safety must all be addressed. Car parking across the whole site at ground and first floor level must be resisted as this will result in a frontage offering little or no interaction with the street. Generally, if car parking has to be provided above ground, this should be provided to the north of the site.
To the south, the opportunity could be taken to introduce a new office tower. Resultant new construction should be of a striking contemporary design. It is not acceptable to mimic the pastiche style of the surrounding buildings. Rather this building should be a flagship for the future business development in the area. The location lends itself to an increase in scale, with the possible introduction of a tower of up to 10 storeys. It is suggested that consideration be given to preparing a site specific planning brief.

Any development on this site will have to include necessary associated parking provision in addition to the 360 public spaces. It may be appropriate to re-evaluate this figure if other developments in the area alter the parking profile in any significant way.

A further option to retain and refurbish the existing car park, improving security and safety and bringing it up to present day standards is currently being considered through the Resources Management Committee.

6.5 Johnstone House
Johnstone House has recently been refurbished and is now reaching full occupation for office use. It is possible that Johnstone House could be successfully linked to the Chapel Street site above. A landscaped buffer could be formed between this and Thistle Court taking the opportunity to establish a pedestrian link from Rose Street to Chapel Street. The pedestrian link could introduce a new square between the Johnstone House and Chapel Street car park sites.

6.6 Little Chapel Street
This is quite a wide street with the north established as an "entertainment" area, including a public house, nightclub and casino. To the south is new housing, comprising 40 flats constructed in 1996. These uses, particularly the housing, are likely to remain long term. It is important to maintain a diverse range of uses in the City Centre. Creating an area entirely devoted to business could contribute as little to the vibrancy of the street in the evening as housing does during the day. Although vehicular access to the flats will have to be maintained, it is possible to widen the footpath on the north side of the street. The introduction of an extended café use, with tables and chairs on the street, could take advantage of the southerly aspect.
6.7 Union Row/Union Wynd Car Park

This site is key to the success of any future City Centre Business Zone. It is currently in use as surface car parking and consequently does not realise its full potential. This site presents an ideal opportunity to create a business heart for the area with links to Chapel Street and Huntly Street. Parking facilities could be relocated either in a public underground facility or in a multi-storey occupying the northern corner of the site. Again, an underground facility has the benefit of concealing parking and maximising the development potential on the surface.

It is important to take advantage of the opportunity this site presents and to promote it with good quality architecture. Although the site is immediately adjacent to Union Street, it does not lie in the conservation area. It is expected that any new construction proposed will be of striking contemporary design. Future proposals should incorporate the necessary pedestrian links and square to continue the development of the collegiate network.

Although proposed buildings should generally be sympathetic in scale and massing to their surroundings, this does not preclude the introduction of an innovative, well considered solution on a larger scale. An increase in scale and massing can be extremely successful in an urban environment. Existing large-scale buildings, such as Grampian House in Union Row, fit in well with their granite surroundings, providing an image of efficiency and urban sophistication appropriate for a prestige City Centre location.

Union Wynd could be closed to through traffic, with service only access provided. This would allow greater flexibility in creating pedestrian priority around the site linking Huntly Street directly to the proposed business hub of the area. An improved pedestrian network would also be of benefit to Union Street around Gilcomston Church.

An outline planning application for an office development of approximately 9,000sq m on the car park site is currently under consideration. Given that the site currently has a planning consent for 94 flats, a site-specific planning brief should be considered for this area.
6.8 Chapel Street

Planning consent was granted in June 2001 for a budget hotel of 155 bedrooms with a restaurant at 35 Chapel Street. Immediately to the north of this, a development of 26 flats was approved in May 2001 for 55-57 Chapel Street. Both these developments are now under construction, demonstrating value and business confidence in the area.

The east side of Chapel Street could be promoted for mixed use to create a core of office development. Although these buildings are not in the conservation area, they do form an important part of the character of the street. It is essential to retain as much of the granite heritage of the City Centre as possible. It is therefore suggested that redevelopment could take place behind retention of the Chapel Street façade. Retail uses should remain on the ground floor to encourage live frontages and provide the diversity of uses vital to such a location.

The existing gap site (above) could be maintained and developed creating a pedestrian link through to Summer Street. Eventually a similar link to the south could be introduced to further develop and enhance the pedestrian network.

6.9 Huntly Street

Generally, Huntly Street, from Union Street to Summer Street, operates successfully as it exists. The street makes a significant contribution to the area with a mix of retail, business and residential uses. Landmark buildings such as St Mary's Cathedral and the former Blind Asylum (Princewall House) are readily identifiable landmarks in the urban landscape. The introduction of a City Centre Business Zone to the west would support the continued mix of uses here.

The City Council owned surface car park on the corner of Huntly Street and Summer Street presents a development opportunity. Parking could be relocated to a new facility, either underground, or in a multi-storey immediately to the south. Any new building
here should be sympathetic to the character of Huntly Street, forming a bookend to the street. It should also address Summer Street, establishing a high quality introduction to any proposed Business Zone from the north. A site-specific planning brief should be considered for this site.

6.10 Langstane Kirk

Langstane Kirk is listed Category "B". No longer in ecclesiastical use, planning consent was recently refused for conversion to licensed premises, with a subsequent appeal dismissed. It is extremely difficult to find appropriate new uses for historic buildings of this scale. Local community councils and conservation bodies have been keen to encourage a continued community use in some form. Whilst this is acceptable in principle, building maintenance costs continue to prove prohibitive for such development.

Uses, compliant with current policy, that maintain the building volume, together with important features such as stained glass windows, are likely to be acceptable in principle. The former Melville/Carden Place Church in Carden Place is a listed church of similar size, which was converted for office use, and it would be acceptable to do the same with Langstane. Other options include gallery or museum and retail.

6.11 Justice Mill Lane

The main volume of the church is large enough to allow the possibility of constructing a building within, leaving the surrounding historic fabric intact. A similar award-winning scheme has been implemented at St Francis Cathedral in the Gorbals in Glasgow.

In order to address one of the major sources of conflict between pedestrians and both vehicular traffic and residents, it is suggested that the possibility of a link between Langstane Place and Union Street be investigated. A new connection to Union Street would enable more efficient links with the City Centre allowing pedestrians direct access to public transport.

Ideally, this could be formed to the west of the Capitol Cinema. The link could then be developed into a square, which would further develop the proposed collegiate network of pedestrian spaces. This creates the opportunity for buildings on either side of a link to open out a frontage onto the square.

Any pedestrian link need only replace the ground floor shopfront of a Union Street property. The upper floors could remain in-situ, allowing the façade to continue unbroken along the street. Any loss of upper floor accommodation would leave an unsatisfactory opening creating difficulties in resolving the corner on either side.
The resulting street would be unique in the City Centre as it would be the only truly pedestrian street accessed directly from Union Street. It must be well lit and finished in high quality materials to create an attractive place. Although a single operator could control any new units created onto the new square, it would add interest if a variety could be introduced, with a general café culture supported by retail. Further feasibility work is required to determine the overall effect, both physically and economically, before this idea is developed.

Traffic modelling has demonstrated that daytime closure of Justice Mill Lane is unfeasible. However, consideration should be given to restricting vehicular movement during peak pedestrian activity times. Introducing a service access only restriction after 6pm will result in less conflict and allow the street to become more pedestrian friendly.

In the meantime, a traffic-calming scheme is proposed in conjunction with the proposed hotel/licensed premises development on the former Satrosphere site. These measures include introducing speed tables and extending pavements to a minimum of 2.5m whilst the carriageway is restricted to 5.5m.
increased as far as is practicable. The possibility of gaining an extra 0.5 to 1 metre width over this stretch of pavement would make a considerable difference to pedestrian comfort.

In addition, the pedestrianisation of Summer Street outside Gilcomston Church potentially removes a traffic pinch point from Union Street. If necessary, a timed service access can also be implemented for the area and exclusive pedestrian use could be introduced by late morning. This could create an environment where cafés and shops could be introduced supporting the needs of the proposed business community to the north. Street furniture should be kept to a minimum in an effort to create as flexible a pedestrian space as possible.

Similarly to Union Street, Thistle Street does not take advantage of its southerly aspect and the area of footpath on the north side between Rose Street and Chapel Street could be widened.

7.0 Conclusions
It is clear that the West End currently does not realise its full potential. Development opportunity sites are many and varied, but are disjointed. The initial ideas set out in section 6 above demonstrate how a more cohesive urban form could be achieved. The possible measures that can be introduced to improve the quality of the public realm are necessary to knit the development sites together.

It is not intended, however, that the ideas identified in this Study are perceived as finalised proposals. Rather they are included as a framework for discussion and offer possible solutions to current problems. All the ideas outlined could easily be developed through policy, promotion and incremental step change. A phased programme of implementation could be introduced to establish a City Centre Business Zone (see page 12).

It is important for each of these phases to incorporate the necessary pedestrian network to support any completed redevelopment. However, improvements to the pedestrian network in and around Union Street and Justice Mill Lane could be introduced independently at any time.

Of major concern to most existing businesses and commercial uses in the area is parking. It must be stressed that there will be no loss in the total number of public parking spaces serving the West End area, and that any prospective development will have to include necessary associated parking in addition to public spaces.

It is recognised that possible simultaneous closure of Chapel Street and Justice Mill Lane Car Parks for redevelopment will cause extreme difficulty for visitors and businesses in the West End area. It will be necessary to programme any works to ensure that parking for both commercial and residential uses were not unnecessarily affected.
It is essential that the infrastructure necessary to support a 21st Century City Centre Business Zone is considered at the earliest opportunity. Provision for communications, ICT, ISDN lines, optical cables, etc should be made during the first stages in any of these developments. Input, and possible support, from other agencies, such as Scottish Enterprise Grampian, may be forthcoming.

Implementation of all of these ideas could certainly encourage more vibrant and diverse use of the West End. It is possible that each of these proposals could be introduced on their own, but this may only result in exacerbating the fragmented nature of the area. In order to develop further each of the ideas identified the following recommendations are suggested.

It is not intended, however, that the ideas identified in this Study are perceived as finalised proposals. Rather they are included as a framework for discussion and offer possible solutions to current problems. All the ideas outlined could easily be developed through policy, promotion and incremental step change. A phased programme of implementation could be introduced to establish a City Centre Business Zone (see page 12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>8.0 Recommendations</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>It is recommended that:</td>
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<tr>
<td>a) Land use policy changes are introduced via the emerging Local Plan;</td>
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<tr>
<td>b) A programme of site specific Planning Briefs is implemented:</td>
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<tr>
<td>i) Chapel Street Car Park (A draft has been approved)</td>
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<td>ii) Union Row Car Park (Summer 2002)</td>
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<td>iii) Huntly Street Car Park (Autumn 2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c) Streetscape ideas are developed into proposals</td>
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phase 1: Chapel Street car park
phase 2: Summer Street/Union Wynd car park
phase 3: Huntly Street
phase 4: Chapel Street redevelopment behind façade retention